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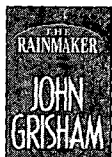
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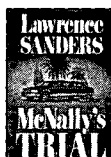
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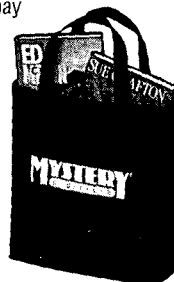
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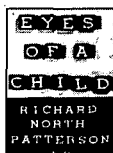
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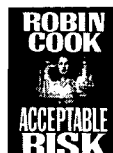
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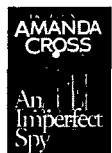
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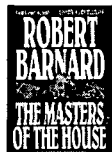
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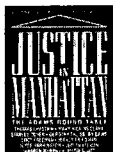
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 40, No. 8, August, 1995. Published every 28 days, which includes special issues in June and at year end, by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, \$2.50 per copy in the U.S.A. \$3.25 in Canada. Annual subscription \$34.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$44.97 elsewhere (in Canada, GST is included) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3311 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1995 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario, N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

Printed in U.S.A.

ISSN: 0002-5224.

Cover by Neal Hughes

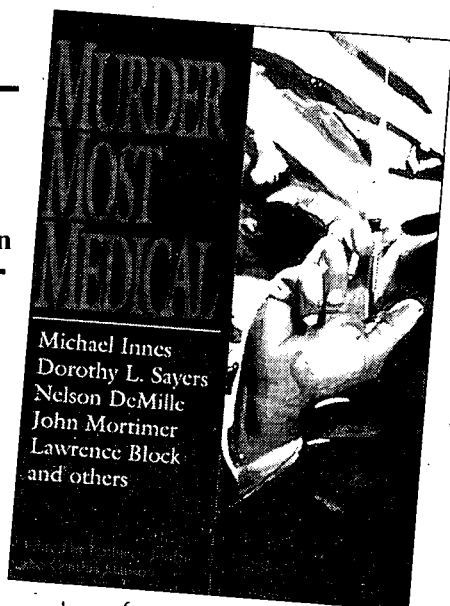
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

On April 27th, in New York, the winners of Edgars for best writing in the mystery field for 1994 were announced by the Mystery Writers of America, and naturally we are pleased to say that "The Dancing Bear" by Doug Allyn, published in AHMM in our March 1994 issue, won for Best Short Story.

Mr. Allyn has a string of prior Edgar nominations behind him for Best Short Story, five of them, in fact, for stories in both AHMM and EQMM: "The Puddle Diver," AHMM, October 1986; "Déjà Vu," AHMM, June 1988; "Sleeper," EQMM, May 1991; "Candles in the Rain," EQMM, November 1992; and "The Ghost Show," EQMM, December 1993.

We say (and he probably does, too) that it's about time!

We also say special congratulations to him, and to AHMM's other nominee, Brenda Melton Burnham for "The Tennis Court," as well as to every other writer honored this year. All the winners and nominees in every category are listed below, with the winners in bold-face type.

BEST NOVEL OF 1994:

***The Red Scream* by Mary Willis Walker (Doubleday)**

Lights Out by Peter Abrahams (Mysterious)

A Long Line of Dead Men by Lawrence Sanders (Morrow)

Miami, It's Murder by Edna Buchanan (Hyperion)

Wednesday's Child by Peter Robinson (Scribner)

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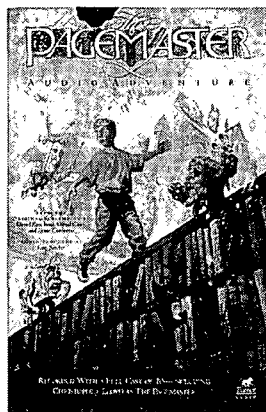
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BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN
AMERICAN AUTHOR OF 1994:

***The Caveman's Valentine* by
George Dawes Green
(Warner)**

One for the Money by Janet
Evanovich (Scribner)

Mallory's Oracle by Carol
O'Connell (Putnam)

Suspicion of Innocence by Bar-
bara Parker (Dutton)

Big Town by Doug J. Swanson
(HarperCollins)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF
1994:

***Final Appeal* by Lisa Scotto-
line (Harper)**

The Broken-Hearted Detective
by Milton Bass (Pocket)

Viper Quarry by Dean Feld-
meyer (Pocket)

Power of Attorney by Walter
Sorrells (Avon)

Sunrise by Chassie West
(Harper)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1994:

**"The Dancing Bear" by
Doug Allyn (AHMM,
March)**

"The Gentleman in the Lake"
by Robert Barnard (EQMM,
June)

"The Tennis Court" by Brenda
Melton Burnham (AHMM,
July)

"The Necessary Brother" by
Brendan DuBois (EQMM,
May)

**"An Eye for a Tooth" by Justin
Scott (*Justice in Manhattan*,
Longmeadow Press)**

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY
NOVEL OF 1994:

***Toughing It* by Nancy
Springer (Harcourt
Brace)**

Poison by Alane Ferguson
(Bradbury)

Shadowmaker by Joan Lowery
Nixon (Delacorte)

The Midnight Club by Christo-
pher Pike (Pocket)

Pale Phoenix by Kathryn Reiss
(Harcourt Brace)

BEST JUVENILE OF 1994:

***The Absolutely True Story
... How I Visited Yellow-
stone Park with the Terri-
ble Rubes* by Willo Davis
Roberts (Antheneum)**

*Harvey's Mystifying Raccoon
Mix Up* by Eth Clifford
(Houghton Mifflin)

*Hester Bidgood: Investigatrix of
Evil Deeds* by E. W. Hildick
(Macmillan)

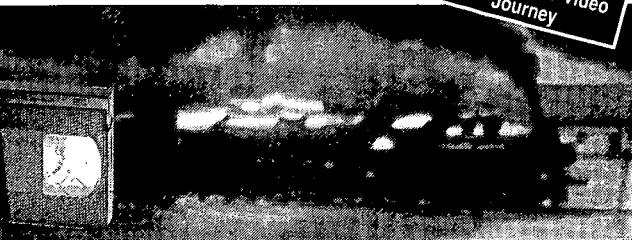
Trouble Will Find You by Joan
M. Lexau (Houghton Mifflin)
Caught by Willo Davis Roberts
(Antheneum)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1994:

***To Protect and Serve* by Joe
Domanick (Pocket)**
Before He Wakes by Jerry
Bledsoe (Dutton)

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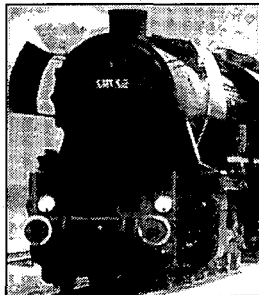
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BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL
STUDY OF 1994:

***Encyclopedia Mysterosa* by William L. DeAndrea (Prentice Hall)**

The Tony Hillerman Companion, edited by Martin Greenberg (HarperCollins)

Great Women Mystery Writers, edited by Kathleen Gregory Klein (Greenwood)

Dick Tracy and American Culture by Garyn G. Roberts (McFarland)

By a Woman's Hand by Jean Swanson and Dean James (Berkley)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1994:

***Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax)**

The Last Seduction, written by Steve Barancik (ITC)

Blink, written by Dana Stevens (New Line Cinema)

Speed, written by Graham Yost (20th Century-Fox)

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OR
MINISERIES OF 1994:

***Cracker: To Say I Love You*, written by Jimmy McGovern (A&E Mystery)**

Unnatural Causes, written by

Peter Buckman (*Mystery!*, PBS)

Prime Suspect 3, written by Lynda LaPlante (*Mystery!*, PBS)

Cracker: Thicker Than Water, written by Trevor Preston (A&E Mystery)

Secret Sins of the Father, written by Lillian Samuel (NBC)

BEST EPISODE IN TELEVISION
SERIES OF 1994:

"Simone Says," *NYPD Blue*, written by Stephen Bochco, Walon Green, and David Milch (ABC)

"Family Values," *Law and Order*, written by Rene Balcer and William N. Fordes (NBC)

"The Erlenmeyer Flask," *The X Files*, written by Chris Carter (20th Century-Fox)

"Pilot Episode/Episode One," *Under Suspicion*, written by Jacqueline Zambrano (CBS)

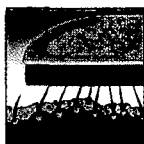
Besides the above, the MWA honored the following. Mickey Spillane was named Grand Master; the Ellery Queen Award went to anthologist Martin Greenberg; a Raven was presented to Paul LeClerc, president of the New York Public Library; and the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of 1994 was presented to Batya Swift Yasgur for "Me and Mr. Harry" (EQMM, Mid-December).

Company bets everything on \$200 million pair of legs

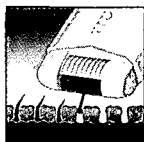
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FICTION



BRIGHT PAINT AND THE WHITE-FACED MAN Stephen Wasylyk

Illustration by Mark Penta

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Hands clasped behind his back, the short fat retailer with the heavy glasses and thinning hair peered despondently through the permanent bars protecting his display window, thinking that the rainy afternoon was as gloomy as the outlook for his discount appliance business.

On the fringe of center city, this neighborhood shopping strip had lasted longer than many others, but the street was in its death throes, scattered sodden trash and an increasing number of plywood boarded fronts heralding the end.

And too many burglaries and holdups, as though competing with the big chains and malls wasn't already enough of a burden.

Schmuck. He'd listened too long to the siren song of waves of politicians promising renewal.

Across the street, a tall, thin man wearing a watch cap and a worn jacket left Modred's model shop, scrubbed his white face as though washing away a vision, glanced nervously up and down the street, and moved off with the jerkiness of a walking elevator.

Probably a glue sniffer who had shoplifted a tube of model cement. Wonderful prospect for a cable ready, twenty-nine inch color TV console with stereo

sound, remote control, and built-in VCR.

He sighed. A Going Out of Business Sale was in order, but first he'd pass the word to the other shop owners that he'd cut them a good deal on anything they wanted. Like Modred. And Gebhard, the plumber with that magnificent bathroom set up in his window—who the hell would install something like that in one of these crumbling old houses?—and Bickley, the slick guy who had that video rental shop next to Modred. Those so-called adult films of his probably netted him more in a week than *he* realized in a month. Talk about adapting a retail outlet to a specific market segment.

A fourteen-year-old, hair like a scraggly mop atop his otherwise shaven skull, boogied blithely into Modred's shop, reappeared almost instantly, and motored away so rapidly the white blur of his Air Jordans would have left Mercury's legendary winged feet far behind.

A premonition chilled the man's heart. He didn't hesitate. He ran to the phone and dialed 911.

Ganz pushed open the door and halted. The model shop was narrow. In the six-foot-wide aisle along one wall, the

man lay face down, arms outspread. When he'd fallen, one arm evidently had swept a display of small paint jars from the counter to the white terrazzo floor with such force that several had shattered and splattered bright shades of acrylic immediately in front of the door.

Beyond him, the open-drawered cash register and counter on the right led into a line of glass-topped display cases. Behind the cases the wall was lined with shelves filled with brightly colored boxes, projecting signs reading AVIATION, SPACE, NAVAL, AUTOMOBILES, MILITARY, RAILROADING, SHIPS. Suspended from the ceiling were Lilliputian authentic versions of more aircraft than he ever knew existed.

Over Ganz's shoulder, Sarah hissed, "Are we going in or what?"

Ganz sighed. Always patient, his new partner. Arroyo had been transferred to Public Information. Brilliant stroke, he thought. The media females would never question the official version of any event from a guy who resembled Lorenzo Lamas. They'd be too busy fantasizing what crime they could commit that would guarantee being arrested by *him*.

He gingerly tiptoed through the mess on the floor, Sarah fol-

lowing—a dancing bear in a shapeless raincoat and battered hat and a slim, graceful maiden in jacket and jeans performing a crime scene ballet.

Unlike some, he didn't resent being paired with a woman. A bit on the tall side with short brown hair, her slimness was deceptive. She was probably stronger than he was. He never went near the fitness room, but tales of the way she tossed weights around had made him firmly resolve never to make her angry, and definitely never to tell her she talked too much and sometimes too loudly. Not like the laid-back Arroyo at all.

When it came to females in the department, for all he cared they could appoint a commissioneress tomorrow. At least she wouldn't be down *here*—carrying a gun, gazing upon blood, guts, mayhem, and other grossness he considered unsuitable for feminine eyes.

To Ganz, women were a wonder to be gazed upon with awe and trepidation. They could be heavenly music or a siren song, a blessing or a curse, an inspiration or a terror. He regretted that some were willing to give up the eternal edge they had over men for the dubious distinction of proving they could handle certain jobs. When it came to the feminine mystique, something wonderful was lost

in the juxtaposition of a nineteen-round Glock strapped alongside a well shaped bosom.

"If it was him again," said Sarah, "this is the first time he's used that gun."

"Doesn't look like he used it this time." He could be wrong, but it appeared to him that the shop owner had left the cash drawer open, come around, and headed for the door, probably looking for help. Halfway there, he'd clutched at the counter for support, sweeping it clean and turning the white floor into an embryonic Jackson Pollock painting requiring only a few smears to make it museum worthy.

"Looks like a heart attack to me. The M.E. will straighten it out."

Sarah shrugged. "A death caused in the commission of a felony is still murder. Looks like Ski Mask finally ran out of luck."

"Not until we catch him."

In the storage room at the rear, he found open deadbolts top and bottom on the door to the alley, the door locked only by a catch that required a key from the outside. He peered out, came back, and said, "You want to dance your way out through that mess again and tell them they can get out of the rain if they use the rear entrance? Plenty of room for ev-

erybody if they do it that way, but I want the door dusted for prints and some shots of the floor just inside first."

She waved at the splattered paint. "They'd do that anyway, wouldn't they?"

"I'm not talking about the front. I'm talking about the back. Some wet footprints there."

Arroyo would have nodded and gone.

She took a deep breath and said, "Door was locked, wasn't it? Maybe Modred—isn't that his name—went outside just before he was held up. Taking trash out—"

Rather than argue, Ganz spread his arms wide and tiptoed through the mess on the floor himself, looking like a two hundred and thirty pound tap dancer executing intricate steps to music that existed only in his head, while she stared, her expression saying this man is definitely weird.

Sarah took the lead when they broke the bad news to Mrs. Modred, who turned out to be on the plump side, with more permed brown hair than the law should allow. Her heavily madeup eyes didn't glisten with a single tear. She shrugged off her tragedy, saying she'd been living with Modred's bad heart for more than

a year. He'd been very stubborn. Didn't like his doctor, an Hispanic woman named Ruiz, and being a chauvinistic bigot or a bigoted chauvinist, take your choice, he'd ignored the medications, the suggested regimen, and her advice after his heart had put him on his back for two weeks. No, he had to return to sixteen hours a day in that stupid model shop. No proper exercise, no proper food. Some people never learn.

Now, *she* was living right. Daily workouts at the health club, eating properly, too. Spouting caloric intakes, fat percentages, triglycerides, and cholesterol levels with professional pompousness as though giving a lecture at a health institute, she left no doubt that if her stupid husband had listened to her, he'd be running the marathon without breathing hard instead of not breathing at all.

"One of the grief stages," Sarah knowingly said later. "She's angry with him because he died. Crying comes next."

Having a wide experience with sudden widows, Ganz didn't think so. She sounded as if she was trying to convince them her husband virtually committed suicide, but not many heart attack victims invited disaster by pushing the situation to the limit after-

ward. A very sobering experience. If anything, they became too cautious.

And his male radar had picked up a very powerful signal emanating from the artificially lashed eyes. Beneath the permed hair and jiggling plumpness lurked a very sexy woman who wouldn't remain a lonely widow for long, and may not have been very lonely beforehand.

By morning they still hadn't identified the walking cadaver seen leaving the store, mainly because that area had seen more than its share of walking cadavers wearing watch caps and dirty jackets, as if host to a permanent convention of the National Association of Zombies. Nor had they turned up the kid with the fast feet. His role was obviously limited. He'd opened the door, seen the body, and wisely decided his best interest lay in rapidly removing *his* body from the vicinity.

Open to question was whether Modred had been held up by the guy whom the very imaginative press had dubbed the Ski Mask Bandit, responsible for at least six others in the general area, or whether the free enterprise system had spawned a new entrepreneur.

Ganz leafed through the interview reports, which added up to the usual, "Din see nobody," and "Din see nuttin," with an occasional "Why you hasslin' me, man?" thrown in.

By this time, the bandit should really have been flagged down on general principles, but it was difficult to isolate one guilty looking person when *everyone* on those streets looked guilty of something—and probably was—but the odds against him were mounting. Eventually he had to lose.

Overweight, thick-necked Lieutenant Polansky—the precinct's deepest mystery, since no one could determine how he got the job—only grunted and said, "What is he? Some kinda Albert Finestein who is smarter than you guys?"

"More like Mandela the Magician, who disappears into thin air," said Sarah under her breath.

Ganz grinned. Better sense of humor than Arroyo.

Back at his desk, he made a list of the holdups. Four had taken place in the morning just as the stores opened, the take small because the previous day's receipts would have been deposited. Two more in the afternoon, the take much larger; one on the same day as a morning holdup. Working a double

shift, playing a little double jeopardy?

Now the model shop in mid-afternoon.

Modred hadn't survived to give a description as the others had. Big gun, the morning victims had said, but any gun looked big when pointed at you. The two afternoon victims hadn't found the size of the gun noteworthy.

Ganz pondered this little discrepancy, which might or might not be significant.

Could there be *two* guns? If so, then they were dealing with *two* holdup men. Ski masks were ski masks, but the malodorous holding cell was proof that bad guys never changed *anything*, much less guns.

After discussing the pros and cons for fifteen minutes—with herself, since the unwed Ganz had somehow developed a married male's ability to tune out the female voice at will—Sarah set about contacting the six victims about their differing perceptions of the gun.

At the shelter established by the good people of St. Anselm to feed the homeless, a tall, thin man sat across a table from a priest, looking contrite. The priest spoke slowly, without heat or rancor, as though explaining a difficult theological point to a slightly slow stu-

dent. The priest didn't seem to be getting the point across. Very difficult to get any theological point across to anyone, these days.

Ganz stood on the sidewalk in front of the model shop and examined things to the north, south, and points between. Two stories of brick stretching both ways, the view of the tall towers of center city to the south broken only by the white spire of St. Anselm's four blocks away. Ground floor lined with small stores and shops that could hardly be termed upscale; living quarters on the second. Spotted here and there with plywood instead of plate glass.

Well now. A wealth of sole-proprietor establishments for a holdup man to select from, the cash flow of some, like the grocery on the corner and the dry cleaner, requiring the register to be emptied several times a day. With filet mignon at the top of the menu, why would a holdup man select Modred's model shop, which had to have a cash trickle that made it the equivalent of a quarter pounder without fries?

He didn't notice that his bulk was forcing people to walk around him until he saw a heavy, dark-haired man dressed in black and clerical

collar bearing down on him and giving no quarter because God was obviously on his side.

Ganz stepped into the street with a muttered, "Forgive me, Father," and crossed to the discount appliance store to talk to the man who had made the 911 call.

What made him report a holdup?

He hadn't, the man said. He'd simply reported something wrong at the model shop. Not until after the police looked into it did he know what happened.

Oh-oh, thought Ganz. The first officers on the scene had peeked in, seen the body on the floor and the open register drawer, and wisely retreated, calling it in as a holdup. And by the time it reached him, someone had given the credit to Ski Mask, and being basically as stupid as everyone else, he and Sarah had gone along with it.

Pair of genius detectives the city was paying for here.

He declined the offer of a cable ready, twenty-nine inch color TV console with stereo sound, remote control, and built-in VCR at a price the man swore couldn't be matched if he bought it off the back of a truck—still in the original carton—and strolled around to the narrow, cobblestoned alleyway in the rear of the model shop.

The usual trashcans, dumpsters, and metal-sheathed doors delighted his eye. Along with a small van. All deliveries in the rear, please.

The van's driver carried a small carton into the video rental shop. Owned by a guy named Bickley. Ganz followed—no storeroom necessary here—and watched Bickley sign for the delivery, a tall man with very mod glasses and wavy hair that seemed to be molded from dirty gray plastic, so stiff he might have donned it in the morning like a helmet. His designer labeled shirt and slacks and fawn colored sport shoes with soft rubber soles announced that here was a man who was with it—but totally. People who advertised they were with it irked Ganz.

Bickley had stood outside Modred's in the rain the day before, watching the body being removed. He'd answered Ganz's questions cheerfully. No, he really hadn't seen anything. At his counter, his back was to the street. More important to keep an eye on people in the store. Half his stock would walk out if he didn't.

Nothing to add today. Nice guy, Modred. He'd miss him. Shop would probably be boarded up now. Mrs. Modred wouldn't keep it open, the way

she had when Modred had his heart attack.

Not a businesswoman, Mrs. Modred?

Hardly. He'd had to help her out, run next door every so often to give her a hand. Happy to do it for a few weeks, but now . . . well . . . closed shop alongside his wouldn't help, but what could you do? Too bad.

With a final glance at the row upon row of those little boxes that could transport you to fantasy worlds of your own choosing while you were ensconced in a soft seat with a bag of chips, Ganz headed for his car, trying to recall the last time he'd heard someone say *too bad* with no trace of regret at all.

On the way to the office, he called the M.E.'s office to request that no shortcuts be taken during Modred's autopsy. When he walked in, he was handed two chilling messages. The imperious Irish Beauty had postponed their dinner date to tomorrow night, while the Italian Sensation, a Philadelphia policewoman he'd been squiring about, was confirming that she'd arrive as planned for dinner, also tomorrow night.

With trembling hands, he buried the messages in his shirt pocket, the Ski Mask Bandit and the problem of Modred no longer paramount, since if

he couldn't handle this romantic problem with aplomb and complete credibility, he'd be stretched out in a hospital bed for several weeks while his broken body mended.

So he only half listened as Sarah said he'd been right about the guns.

The four morning holdup victims had definitely been impressed by the size of the weapon. Looked as big as the one Clint Eastwood waved around in those Dirty Harry movies. The two afternoon victims, however, described it as flat and black, so it could safely be concluded there were two guns. And something else. Mr. Morning had been polite and soft spoken while Mr. Afternoon had been loud and threatening. Further conclusion: they had *two* Ski Mask Bandits.

Would it be wise to tell Lieutenant Polansky now? Or wait until he was in a good mood, which was as rare as a pay raise?

Academic question when Riley and Jackson brought in a slightly bruised, handcuffed man, along with a flat black automatic and a ski mask. They'd seen him flee a store, leaving a woman's high-pitched scream behind, and picked him up after a short chase.

Polansky wanted to release the story to the media immedi-

ately. Ganz pointed out that the guns and demeanor indicated two perpetrators. The one they had was Mr. Afternoon. Mr. Morning with his big gun was still out there. How would it look if they bragged about collaring the Ski Mask Bandit, only to have him reappear?

Uncovering his midafternoon snack, which was delivered on a tray from the nearby delicatessen, Polansky pointed out why Ganz was totally unsuited for leadership and command. He couldn't see the Big Picture. Ski Mask Bandits were like Super Bowls. Every time you looked up, there was another one. His former partner Arroyo, now in that cushy PR job, would simply explain that Ski Mask Bandit XXXIV was in custody and they were now looking for Ski Mask Bandit XXXV.

Furthermore, cities ought to ban the sales of ski masks, where they were used only by criminals. Had he ever seen anyone skimming along the streets on a couple of skinny pieces of wood like one of them Olympic nuts? No. Because they'd be scraping the kumquat up in short order after a bus, trash truck, or cab flattened him.

Ganz stumbled to his desk. So far, a dark day.

A call from the M.E.'s office brought a glimmer of brightness. Cardiac failure confirmed, along with the presence of heart medication, but because of his warning, they'd spotted a needle mark on Modred's forearm. No idea yet of what might have been injected. The substance had left no trace. They were searching out possibilities on their computer but suggested he contact Modred's physician to see what medications had been prescribed. Sometimes patients inadvertently mix things that don't work together, you know.

So he called Dr. Ruiz and listened to a throaty mezzo with an accent that made him think of guitars and serenades under the moon and Risë Stevens singing the "Habanera," from *Carmen* on one of his prized old LP hi-fi records, and filled him with a passionate desire to rush to the doctor's office to click castanets and stamp his heels—assuming, of course, she looked like her voice—an urge he unfortunately had to stifle because he was already in the center of a romantic minefield where one false step could leave him permanently disabled.

She carefully spelled out the names of several medications, all of which were taken orally. He passed them on to the

M.E.'s office with the feeling that he had wasted his time. Except for the voice, which he filed away in his mind for some future investigation that had nothing to do with crime.

Sarah impatiently rapped on her desk to get his attention. "While you were fooling around in Polansky's office, a priest called. Father James. I don't know if that's his first or last name. He said he had something to tell us, I don't know what, and was coming in. I told him he didn't have to do that, you know a priest might not feel too comfortable in a police station, that we'd be happy to go over to St. Anselm's and talk to him, after all it isn't really that far, but he said no, he'd rather come in here . . ."

It *really* wasn't that far. In his black suit and clerical collar, a burly priest was already bearing down on them with purposeful strides. He could have been the one for whom Ganz had stepped aside earlier—unless they were all taught in seminary to walk like that—but the secular person he had in tow was far more interesting.

Tall and thin, with a white face, he moved with the jerkiness of a walking cadaver.

Ganz had a moment of panic when the priest extracted a

large gun from a paper sack. Civilians, even priests, extracting guns from paper sacks in police stations could find a dozen others pointed at them in the blink of an eye.

His panic eased when he saw a large chip broken out of the butt. He was looking at a full sized plastic replica of a classic Colt .44 six-shooter, probably assembled from a kit carried by Modred's model shop. Designed to be displayed on a plaque by those who couldn't afford the real thing, so authentic that if rubbed with a little gun oil, one's nose would reinforce the visual deception. And so realistic, no one but an expert would challenge the business end.

Father James also extracted a dark blue ski mask from his magic bag and placed it alongside the gun.

"Ah," said Ganz.

"A blessed miracle," breathed Polansky, who had charged out of his office, fearful that Unable-To-See-The-Big-Picture Ganz would arrest a priest, for heaven's sake, just for pulling a gun out of a sack in a police station.

"There is a box in the vestibule at the church for contributions for the shelter," boomed Father James. "One of my duties is to empty it each afternoon." His face darkened. "If there is anything to empty." He

was speaking to Sarah but looking at Ganz, as though the lack of donations was his fault.

"I noticed that every time there was a holdup in the morning, there was a wad of bills that afternoon. God works in mysterious ways, but I was sure He had no hand in that."

Excellent ecclesiastical observation, thought Ganz.

"I made it a point to watch. After the last robbery, I saw Ziggy here drop money into the box. I knew he had no money. He's been living and eating at the shelter, doing chores to help us out. It was obvious how he had obtained it." Father James's baritone turned sad. "Since it was stolen, we will now have to return it to the people from whom it was taken. And while I could dissuade Ziggy from continuing, he *had* broken the law, even though he had only the best of intentions. Perhaps he could be forgiven, but nevertheless, it was my duty to turn him in—"

"Well now, Father," said Polansky. "The confessional—"

"The man isn't even a Catholic. I am speaking of a personal moral dilemma here. How could I be the cause of sending a man to prison when his only motive was to help those as unfortunate as himself?"

Polansky clapped Ziggy on the shoulder. "Thought you

was some kinda Robin Good, right?"

"On the other hand, I could say nothing, and the holdups would cease and be forgotten."

They sure would, thought Ganz.

"However, while trying to persuade Ziggy to turn himself in, he told me something that may be of more importance to you than a well-intentioned bandit with a fake gun, something that I think he can use as a . . . plea bargain?" His eyebrows rose. "To gain protection? In my custody?" He touched Ziggy's shoulder. "Tell them what you saw."

"They were sticking a needle in him," said Ziggy.

The day had suddenly brightened considerably.

"We need someone to take this down," Ganz told Sarah.

Ziggy had committed the holdups because the store owners had irked him by contributing very little when Father James had solicited donations. Seeing the bills crammed into the cash drawers, he saw no reason why they shouldn't part with a few so the center could continue feeding the hungry. Like himself. He hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, so the first thing he'd stolen was the gun kit from Modred's shop, even though he

could have managed to get one with very little trouble. He'd committed the holdups in the morning because from noon into the evening, his chores at the center kept him busy.

Everything had been going smoothly until he dropped his plastic gun. A piece had broken off the butt. Anyone who noticed would know that couldn't happen to a real one, so he'd gone to Modred's store to shop-lift a tube of glue.

When he'd pushed open the door, he saw a man behind a wild-eyed Modred, clutching him in a fierce embrace and pinning his upper arms to his sides while a woman held Modred's forearm with one hand, a hypodermic needle poised in the other.

He backed out and went his way before they got a good look at him, seeing nothing unusual in the scene. He'd stumbled onto others far more bizarre. The needle meant nothing. Using one was a prime recreational activity in that area. After he'd heard Modred was dead, he realized that needle injectors of his acquaintance required no help whatsoever. In fact, they preferred it that way.

Did he recognize the man and woman?

The man was Bickley, who owned the shop next door. The woman had a lotta brown hair.

*

They had trouble finding four other slightly plump women with more permed brown hair than the law should allow, but once they did, Ziggy had no difficulty selecting Mrs. Modred out of the resultant lineup of lush femininity.

Some of the cloud cover returned when the assistant D.A. said, "You're still not there. Both deny everything, and neither will turn over on the other. All you have is Ziggy. Before he began his stroll down the boulevard of broken dreams, he'd have made a credible witness. Now a good defense attorney will have a jury believing he's from the planet Mongo, here to sell his story to a supermarket tabloid. You have no idea of what they injected into Modred—"

"Could be insulin," said Sarah. "You hit a nondiabetic with a good dose, and strange things happen. And it doesn't leave any traces. All we have to find is where they bought it. Or it might have been nothing more than an air bubble. An embolism—"

They really didn't need to inject anything, thought Ganz. If someone grabbed a man while someone else poked him with a needle and whispered his earthly days were done, the most healthy heart would esca-

late to warp speed. Poor Modred's would have used up its remaining allotted contractions in short order.

"Whatever," said the assistant D.A. "You need something solid to back up Ziggy's story or we have a problem."

The day brightened again when the Italian Sensation called to tell Ganz she couldn't make it after all. No, Amtrak hadn't gone out of business. She'd been tagged for security detail for the vice president, who was coming to Philadelphia to speak to the party faithful at a dinner that would cost them each enough to feed several homeless people for a month. Sheer gender exploitation, she complained. They wanted her to show up on TV as an example of the department's nondiscriminatory policy. Perhaps he could come down? For a bit of linguini and clam sauce? Hmmm?

In a voice full of heartbreak while his heart sank, Ganz told her he couldn't make it tomorrow since he was working on a difficult case—not mentioning, of course, that the difficult case was the Irish Beauty—but he'd catch a train the following night. He hung up, so full of gratitude to the vice president, whoever he was, he might even vote for him the next time around. After all, as long as she

was *there*, and the Irish Beauty *here*, he had nothing to fear.

Except Sarah, who was looking at him with the slight frown people sometimes acquire when observing strange species in a zoo.

Meanwhile, Polansky made an uncontested unilateral decision that the center could keep the money for ridding the neighborhood of Ski Mask Bandit XXXV, confiscated a hat, dropped a pair of twenties inside, and sent it around with the message that Father James had saved them all a great deal of trouble and civilian cooperation should be rewarded. Or else.

Suddenly Bickley, seated alongside Sarah's desk as she filled in the forms all defense attorneys attempt to find fault with, leaped up, and in one last grasp at freedom, shouted he was leaving and would sue for false arrest.

Already irritated because her weird partner had the nerve to push the typing chore off on her, Sarah rose to her feet. Staring at him with eyes so cold Bickley's mod glasses frosted over, and in a voice that struck terror into every male heart within earshot, she said, "*SIT!*"

Bickley sat.

Ganz smiled. His new part-

ner had just deprived him of an excuse to hop the mod Bickley—which he'd been looking for since hearing Ziggy's story—but it was a small price for learning she'd waste no words when the occasion demanded.

And then the sun broke through and shone full upon them all—through the intercession of the good father's Employer, according to Polansky.

A pouting Bickley slumped in his chair and thrust his legs out before him petulantly, knowing Ganz would have to step over them, and sneering the sneer he always used on badly dressed people who weren't with it.

Since they were practically under his nose, Ganz couldn't help but notice that the toes of the fawn colored, rubber soled shoes were speckled with minute multi-colored dots.

He grinned a grin that equaled that of Father James when he'd emptied the hat Polansky had passed around.

The forensic people would be delighted to point out to a jury that those dots precisely matched the paint spattered on Modred's terrazzo floor, and could exist only if the shoes had been there when those bottles shattered.

FICTION

Well Done Charlie

Terry Courtney

VISITING
HOURS

M-F 6-7

S-S 11-1

STATE PRISON

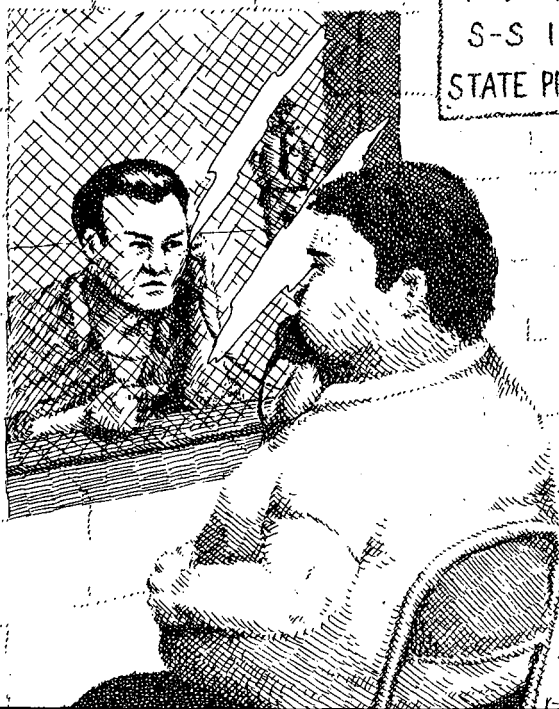


Illustration by Keith Peters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sunday afternoon Frankie Ice eased his bloated body onto a chair on the visitors' side of the wire-meshed glass, his nerves humming an anthem to their presence. Frankie was always very much on edge in the state prison, even if he was only visiting. Once when he was younger he... but that he didn't want to remember. He had to wait five minutes for Carmine A. to appear, and in spite of the excellent air conditioning, he wiped his jowly face many times with a handkerchief. Frankie sweated easily, but never so readily as inside the tall gray granite walls.

When Carmine A. walked in, he saw Frankie immediately and sat down opposite his gopher. Even in his present surroundings the mob boss had a serene look on his handsome face. A near genius plastic surgeon had erased fifteen years from his seventy year old features, and the finest dye kept his full head of hair raven black.

Both men took their telephones off the hooks. Carmine said, "Frankie."

Frankie said, "Carmine."

"I'm in the middle of a good chess game, so let's get to it. What's happening with our problem?"

Frankie beamed. "What problem? Everything worked out just like you said it would. The beaners went back across the river, and I don't think they'll be back, at least not for a long time. Case closed. Problem solved."

Carmine A.'s eyelids dropped as he nodded. "That's good news, Frankie. That's very good news. Tell the right people I appreciate the job they did and I'll remember them when I come home."

"I'll do that, Carmine." From force of habit Frankie glanced over both shoulders, but the nearest guard was sitting twenty feet away concentrating on cleaning his fingernails. "There is one matter, Carmine."

The aging don cocked his head. "Such as?"

"Charlie."

Carmine pondered for a moment to place Charlie in his mind, then said, "What about Charlie?"

Frankie's shoulders jerked up and down once. "It's maybe nothing, but Charlie got fired. Some trouble, I don't know what yet. Anyway, I was thinking that with our not needing Charlie's services any more and Charlie being out of work and maybe someday needing money and Charlie knowing things about us and... or like

maybe getting in some other kind of trouble and having things to bargain with and . . . well, you get my drift. Charlie knows too much, especially about me, since I set it up."

Carmine A. gazed over Frankie's head for a moment, then looked back down and nodded once. "I agree. Take care of it. I think with someone like Charlie an accident would be best."

"That ain't always so easy, but I'll do my best. I think I should give it to . . ."

"You weren't going to say the name of one of our people, were you, Frankie? Saying names of our friends out loud is not smart and is not done, especially in here. Think sometimes, Frankie."

"No, no. I know that. No names. Sure, I know that."

As long as Carmine A. decided Frankie Ice could stay alive, he would always be just a gopher.

Strong gusting winds blowing through the relentless downpour had turned Sunday night foul, as foul as Bellinger's mood as he eased his unmarked department vehicle to a stop on a deserted side street. A tall, thin man wearing a cloth cap above his sharp features appeared out of a darkened doorway and

hurried across the sidewalk to slide into the passenger side front seat. Neither man spoke as Bellinger drove around the next corner and parked in the middle of the block.

A truck hissed past, and through the rain-spattered windshield Bellinger watched the pair of taillight galaxies disappear into the distance, his face expressionless. It had once been a good face, but now it was hard and tired. Twenty-eight years on the city police force, eighteen of them in homicide, did that to a good face. The lines the years had dug around his mouth were deep and crow's-feet turned his pale blue eyes into a quote. His once brown hair was now all gray.

Finally Bellinger turned to his passenger. "Got anything for me, Marty?" he asked in a low, weary voice.

Marty the Mouth stared down at his hands clasped on his lap. "Almost nothing yet, lieutenant, and the one thing I did hear is, you know, like maybe silly."

"Talk to me."

"It's about two of them Mexicans."

"Which two?"

"That Mendoza and his bulge. The word around is that Tony Guarino did the hits."

Bellinger's eyebrows rose and fell as he snorted. "That's

not silly, it's moronic. Tony the Blimp is a two-bit thief, a nickel and dimer. Since he was fifteen that's what he's been and nothing more. The Blimp do a hit? Two hits at once and one of them a shooter? Ridiculous."

Marty the Mouth spread his bony hands. "I don't know, lieutenant. The word is Tony owed big time and it got called in."

Bellinger shook his head impatiently. "Owed how? Owed what? Money? I know Tony. He doesn't gamble, and no self-respecting juice man would front him a ten dollar bill. What did he owe?"

Marty sighed and half turned to face Bellinger. "I didn't hear what, but I heard how. See, when they extradited his brother Louie back when all those guys were on videotapes, Louie wouldn't cop out and now he's doing his stand up five to ten. That put Louie in line for a favor, which he asked, which was to give his brother Tony some little things to do that would make him walking-around cash until Louie gets out. And certain people did just that and Tony was making a delivery and he lost whatever it was he was delivering. I didn't hear what he was carrying, but it was something certain people did not appreciate losing. I heard the Blimp came close to

being history himself over that."

Bellinger shook his head again. "No way. The Blimp is not a violent person. Just the opposite. I don't believe he has it in him to kill."

Marty shrugged. "People surprise themselves when it's put to them as either or, the mark or them."

"All right, I'll waste time looking into it. It's grabbing straws time. What else?"

"About all them dudes disappearing and no bodies ever being found. A guy said another guy said he was with Frankie Ice one night and Ice got loaded and that subject came up. Ice was supposed to have laughed a lot and said that somebody named Charlie was taking care of that. He even drank a toast to this Charlie. That's it. No other name."

Bellinger turned away and gazed out the windshield for a time. Lord, he wished he could retire tomorrow. It was the pressure from above that got to him the most, and once he had been promoted to lieutenant it seemed like all the pressure and stress fell across his shoulders. In the current case where minorities were involved, the political pressure was automatic and predictable even if the particular minority members in question were scum-

bags, because when their families complained to the authorities they always claimed their fathers and brothers were not scumbags, but rather upright, downright, forthright, God-fearing citizens. Oh yes, hurry, retirement.

Bellinger turned back to Marty and half smiled. "That's it, Marty? Just Charlie? So now we look for a man named Charlie who owns a backhoe and can dig twelve foot deep graves for dead drug dealers?"

"There's three or four guys named Charlie who are connected, but you know about them. That's all I got right now." When Bellinger did not reply, Marty said, "Look, lieutenant, I told you before I got that business coming up two weeks from today out in Glenwood and I need help, otherwise I'm looking at three to five, do at least two. I can't do two years, lieutenant. Can you make some calls, talk to people, help me out?"

"I could, Marty, but that's not the way it works, and you know it. We do for each other. Your back gets itchy, so does mine. You get me something good on this matter we've been discussing, and I'll see what I can do. What you talked to me to-night was pure garbage. Get out there and listen me up something I can use, and we do

business. I've got connections in Glenwood. Otherwise, see you in two years, Marty."

Marty closed his eyes, nodding. Marty's associates on the shadowy side of the law called him Marty the Rail, while Bellinger and two other policemen who used him as a snitch called him Marty the Mouth. And like all snitches in the history of mankind, Marty had backed himself into a no-win lifestyle, and he knew it.

On Monday morning Captain Wexler returned from a month-long vacation, his round, normally ruddy face a bright red. The captain's religious preference was golf.

Bellinger slouched down in the chair in front of the captain's desk and propped an ankle on a knee, commenting on Wexler's color.

"Unseasonably hot, even for Phoenix. A stinging sun from dawn to dusk, but one day I shot a ninety-six, so it was worth it."

Bellinger said something appropriate and brought Wexler up to date on several minor and routine matters, then sat up a little straighter.

"We've got a pressure cooker, captain. They're scalp hunting from the mayor's office on down. This is an election year. It goes like this. About a month

ago the Mexican drug people, being human and therefore ambitious and greedy, decided to branch out from the little barrio, come across the bridge, and take over the traffic on this side of the river. Carmine A.'s territory. Well, our organized crime boys thought that was just great. They hoped there would be an all-out shooting war and lots of bad guys would be buried. Of course they're always hoping for that, but it didn't happen. In ten days' time five of the six top Mexican drug people, plus three bodyguards, disappeared. Simply vanished. No bodies, no signs of foul play. They went up in smoke, which in itself is the biggest puzzle of all, especially since we're sure Carmine A. is giving the orders."

"Isn't Carmine A. in prison?"

"Means nothing. Back when you ran that videotape sting, a couple of the players rolled over, but all they nailed Carmine A. for, was conspiracy to commit burglary because he did some financing. Three to seven and he'll do twenty-four months. He hits the street in eleven. And he's been running his organization from the joint with Frankie Ice doing his usual job of gopher. No, we know Carmine A. is still the boss, which makes the disappearance so improbable."

"Why do you say that?"

"Look, you know as well as I do that to people like Carmine A. dead bodies are messages, especially if a body has been worked over before it's killed. Beatings, broken bones, cigarette burns, and the message is clear. Don't inform, don't welch on your bookie or juice man, don't break any of the cardinal rules of the organization, or you will end up like this. And it works. The dummies who do business with the likes of Carmine A. stay in line because they see and hear what will happen to them if they sin. But those Mexicans vanished without a trace, although that worked, too."

Wexler frowned. "How's that?"

"The Mexicans gave up and went back across the river. Carmine A.'s status is quo again. Apparently the Mexicans had the living curds and whey scared out of them, whatever curds and whey are. I've always wondered." Bellinger got up and went to gaze out the captain's window before he remembered it looked out on the blank wall of the county jail. He sat down again feeling dumb.

"Do you have anything at all?" Wexler asked. "The district attorney's office would love to nail Carmine A. for

those dead Mexicans, assuming they are dead."

"They're dead. There's no other explanation, but we don't have a lead to talk about. You know we never solve mob hits, and even if we get names, we can never prove it. I've got the name of a really minor player as one of the hitters, but I don't believe it. I know him so I'll check it out personally, but it won't be anything. Also, some man named Charlie is supposed to have disposed of the bodies."

"Any idea how or where?"

"No. They could have been taken far out of town, maybe out of state, and buried so deep that animals will never dig them up or the weather uncover them. They might... well, there are a lot of possibilities, but right now we don't have a clue."

The captain's telephone rang, and as he reached for it, he said, "Keep me in the picture every day. With my luck this is probably the governor."

Bellinger waited until noon that Monday and went looking for Tony Guarino in the Blimp's favorite lunchtime restaurant. As the lieutenant walked up to the Blimp's table in the rear, a waitress slid two steaming foot-long meatball subs in front of Tony. Bellinger decided it

would take him four lunches to eat that much, but he also considered they might well be the Blimp's appetizers.

"Hello, Tony. Mind if I join you?"

The Blimp paused in the act of reaching for a sandwich and looked up. "You asking these days? Usually you just plop down whether I like it or not."

"Come on, Tony. I just want to have a friendly chat."

"We can't do that, lieutenant. You're what you are and I'm what I am, and we are not friends. We will never be friends. You're working, right? Jeez, that's dumb, Tony. He's always working."

"All right, I'm working." Bellinger sat down opposite the Blimp.

"Fine. You're working. I don't know nothing about anybody or anything."

"You can't know that until I ask."

The Blimp groaned and picked up a sandwich, holding it poised inches from his mouth. "Look, I want to eat this while it's still hot, so ask yes or no questions so I can nod and shake. My sainted mother taught me never to talk with my mouth full, which it is going to be, thank you." He bit into the sub and slowly chewed.

"Okay, Tony, let's get to it. Have you ever heard of a man named Jesus Mendoza?"

The Blimp nodded.
"How?"

The Blimp rolled his eyes and put his sandwich back down on the plate. When he finally swallowed the last of his first bite, he said, "Mendoza is one of those Mexican drugs dudes who nobody can find. I know about him because I read the newspapers and watch TV. Everybody in this city knows about him and the other beaners who also nobody can find. Okay?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Do you know what the word is on the street, Tony? The word around is that you hit Mendoza and his bulge. They say you got in trouble for losing a package and had to make up for it and you did the hits."

The Blimp's puffy eyes opened their widest as he dropped the sandwich onto the edge of his plate and nudged it at the last instant when it almost rolled off onto where his lap would have been if he had had a lap. "That is not even close to being clever or funny." The Blimp's voice had gone up half an octave. "This is not your style. You know me, so you know I'm no hitter. You know exactly what I am, and a hitter that isn't. And I don't know from losing something. Losing what? Lieutenant, I couldn't do hits if I wanted to. I couldn't

kill, period. I can't even set a mousetrap."

"Probably because you eat all the cheese first. I'm looking into this talk, Tony. If you did it, I'll bag you good. You're my only lead right now, and I'm giving you my full attention. I'm after you, Tony."

The Blimp's round head sitting on his improbably thick neck moved slowly back and forth an inch each way. "You'll be cruising up a dead end street, lieutenant." The Blimp's voice was back to normal. "But, hey, I think you know that. I can't figure your play, but I really believe you know what you just said is bull. Sure you know it. What are you trying to do to me, lieutenant? What are you fishing for?"

Bellinger had been watching the Blimp's reactions closely and now believed more than ever that he had been right. This huge man had not fallen apart, gone frantic. No, he had retained his cool, his poise, if it could truly be said that the Blimp had poise. Bellinger was certain Tony the Blimp was not a murderer. So much for Marty the Mouth and street talk.

Bellinger chuckled. "What am I fishing for? Do you see me carrying a harpoon? I'll be seeing you around a lot, Tony, and that's the truth. Who knows, maybe one day in the

gas chamber. Of course they're going to need a much bigger chair. See you."

There was no amusement in Tony the Blimp's stare.

During the next two days, six detectives began to check out the Charlies in the police department computer felony file. As expected, some were dead, some in jail, others too old while some were known to have left the state. Of the possibles investigated by Thursday morning, none looked promising as the Charlie being sought. The detectives kept at it.

During that two day period Bellinger received telephone calls from the mayor, two city councilmen, a city councilwoman, and a prominent Hispanic businessman, all demanding action and results in the case of the missing Mexicans. When Bellinger tried to explain that the caller's interest was misguided because the missing men were nothing more than drug dealers, the rebuttal was that not one of the men had been convicted of any such crime and were in fact upstanding family men and regular contributors to their church. The mayor had gone so far as to point out that he had received a call from Monsignor

Gomez, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, extolling the missing parishioners and their generosity. Being no fool, Bellinger passed on the obvious comment. The mayor was a Catholic.

Thursday morning Bellinger was seated behind his desk while Detective Sergeant Manaher stood with his back to the office door reading from sheets on a clipboard, reporting on the night shift activities.

"Quiet night, lieutenant. Only two stiffes. One in Washburn Park. One shot-dead drug pusher, one alive drug pusher in custody. Three witnesses including an off-duty sheriff's deputy. The usual. A turf dispute."

Bellinger rubbed his eyes. "It never stops, does it?"

"We're out of work if it does," Manaher observed, flipping a sheet. "The other one could be a beauty. Woman named Flynn, forty, lived in an apartment building on East Franklin. Supposed to meet her sister at the movies last night and never showed. Sister called a few times, got no answer, and got worried. About nine thirty went to the apartment and let herself in. Seems the sisters had exchanged keys. Found the sister on her bed shot once through the head. Dead a few hours. The M.E. puts death at

about six. The officers on the scene talked to people in the building, and they all said the same thing. The dead woman was an ideal neighbor. Quiet, friendly, hardworking, no men in her life, no loud parties. There was some jewelry and a TV and VCR, so no robbery. She wasn't molested. But."

Bellinger had been staring at a corner of the ceiling. Now his head snapped down, and he nodded. "Oh yes, the legendary and somewhat fabled but."

"Stuffed away in a box in the back of a closet the officers found eighty thousand dollars. Sixteen packets of five thousand each in hundreds. A lot of cash for anyone to have on hand and especially in that neighborhood, which is strictly middle class."

"Interesting. Who caught it?"

The sergeant consulted a sheet. "Kerry and Baird."

"Good. They're the best. They should check with the woman's employer. That much cash suggests fiddling with company books or tapping a till." Bellinger wrote himself a note to remember to mention the employer angle to the detectives on the case. Employers had been known to get mad enough to kill.

The sergeant said, "That's it and I'm out of here." He opened

the door and started out when Bellinger called his name.

"What was the dead woman's name again?"

"Flynn. Charlene Flynn."

Bellinger scribbled the name under his note.

Half an hour later Sirena Sanchez came into police headquarters and asked for Bellinger. The young woman was beautiful by any standards, her lustrous black hair worn shoulder length and parted in the middle.

As soon as she was seated across from Bellinger she said, "I am Daniel Sanchez's daughter, and I must explain something, lieutenant. I am not here for myself but rather for my mother. You see, I know what my father did for his money, and I did not approve. In fact I hated it. I have not lived at home or spoken to my father for several years."

Bellinger instantly liked Sirena Sanchez very much. Her father had been numero uno in the little barrio drug hierarchy. "I understand, Miss Sanchez."

"But it's my mother and the rest of the family not knowing that is torturing them. I assume my father was murdered, and considering what he was, that might have been inevitable. But you see, we are devout Catholics, and when a person dies, there are certain rites and

rituals to be followed and of course a decent burial, even for my father, for now he is with God to be judged. And everything that is done is, I'm sure, more comforting to the living than the dead. But not being able to do that, and not even knowing, is killing my mother, who is a good woman. To think that her husband was thrown away like garbage is, well, until she knows for sure and has the body, she won't ever be the same."

Well, well, Bellinger thought. What Sirena Sanchez had just said could explain why the men had disappeared, denying their families the opportunity to practice their religious customs, which were obviously, from what the young woman had said, of paramount importance to them. It was clever, far more clever than Bellinger thought Carmine A. could ever be. The pressure among the living to make their men come back home across the river and stay there must have been awesome. Very clever indeed, Carmine A.

Aloud Bellinger said, "I understand, Miss Sanchez, but please try to see where we're at. Your father and those other men vanished without a trace. We don't have a clue or lead. All we know for certain is when they were last seen. I know

some people believe we're not trying to solve this case very hard because of what the missing men were, but that's not true. It's just that we have nothing to go on, nothing to investigate. For instance, where was your father at the time of his disappearance?"

"I don't know. His car was found in the airport parking lot."

"Yes, and the cars of the other men were found scattered all around the city. We also know your father had no reason to go to the airport that night, so there we are with nothing."

The young woman stood up, and Bellinger followed her lead. "Well, thank you for your time, lieutenant. I understand what you said, but it won't help my mother. But then, the only thing that would help her I have a feeling will never happen. Goodbye."

Thursday afternoon Bellinger called Kitty's Bar and left a message for Marty the Mouth. At nine o'clock that evening he picked up the snitch at the usual dark doorway and parked on the usual quiet side street.

Marty looked very unhappy, and Bellinger knew he would get nothing this night.

"Well, Marty?"

Marty hesitated, then said, "I got nothing, lieutenant. Well,

one thing and it's reliable, I can't tell you how. Let's just say I got it from the brother of a guy who was there. Tony the Blimp did not do those hits, but he did have that favor called in. He transported the bodies, him and this other dude. That's all he did, moved the bodies."

"To where?"

"Who knows? Will that get me something in Glenwood?"

"Marty," Bellinger said reproachfully while making a mental note to bring the Blimp into headquarters and introduce him to a twenty-four carat interrogation.

Marty hung his head and mumbled, "I didn't think it would. Two years. Jeez."

"Sorry, Marty. Our game has rules like any other."

"I know, I know. Hell, maybe I'll be safer in the joint. These are dangerous times we're living in, lieutenant. Nobody is safe. This nice girl from the neighborhood, a girl I went to school with, got murdered last night. She was a really good person. Her mother is in a home, got a disease I can't remember the name. Where you can't remember anything. Anyway, it's expensive, that home, but this girl worked hard and kept her mother there. I was talking to Charlie a couple of days ago, and she told me she got fired from her job. She must

have been worried about money and keeping her mother, but she was in good spirits. Guts, you know. So she's dead and what happens to the old lady?"

"You said Charlie. Her name was Charlie?"

"No, Charlene. Charlene Flynn, but we called her Charlie. See, in grammar school she was like, you know, a tomboy. She could play baseball better than half the boys and run faster than most of us. But a nice person. Who the hell would want to murder Well Done Charlie?"

"Well Done Charlie? What's with the well done?"

Marty laughed. "That was her later nickname after she went to work. Well Done Charlie cooked, sort of, and what she cooked was always well done. Very well done. No medium rare for Well Done Charlie. And someone killed her. Why? She... oh my God! That couldn't be. Not Charlie. I know she had money worries but... could it be? Is that why she's dead? She knew too much?"

Bellinger felt the old familiar tingle he could never explain. "Could what be?"

"All those Mexicans gone. What Well Done Charlie cooked was stiffs. Before she got fired, she managed Hanson's Crematorium."

James Hanson was a short, balding middle-aged man who waved his hands excessively when he talked. His rimless glasses magnified piggy little dark eyes.

Bellinger said, "What I want to know is why you fired her."

"Irregularities, lieutenant. I will not tolerate irregularities in my business."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Well, the gas bill, for one. Monday I got the monthly gas bill, and it was outrageous. We had three cremations during that period, but according to the amount the gas company was charging, we should have had ten or eleven, depending on the size of the bodies. When I called to complain, the gas company told me to check the meter reading on last month's bill and then check the current reading on the meter. They were right. We had used that much gas, which should have been impossible. I asked Miss Flynn about it because she was my manager, but she couldn't explain it."

"I'll bet she couldn't."

"It was almost as though she had gone into business for herself, doing cremations at night when no one was here, but that, of course, is impossible."

"Why?"

"There are regulations we must follow. When we have a body to cremate, we must first apply to the city for a permit. We have to provide the death certificate and a signed and notarized request form from the next of kin. Then the city checks with the next of kin to make certain. Then they issue the permit. I checked with the city department, and there were only the three permits issued to us."

Bellinger scratched his head, a wry smile playing on his face. "Maybe Miss Flynn was doing cremations without permits."

"That's unheard of. No, don't say that, lieutenant. They could close me down if that were true. No, impossible."

"Don't worry about it. You said the gas bill for one. There's more?"

"Yes. The videotape. You see that?" Hanson indicated a surveillance camera mounted high on the wall and focused on the side entrance door. "There's another camera like that one in back, aimed at the overhead door. We have that so when we bring in a body our van can back in and the door is closed again. That way no one outside can see what we're unloading."

"Very thoughtful."

"Thank you. The cameras are part of the security system I had installed. The system is ac-

tivated at night, and if either door is opened, the appropriate camera records what's happening. Every morning Miss Flynn or the other worker here, a man, would check the tape counters to see if either camera had run. If so we would have rewound the tape, watched it, and probably called the police. That has never happened. Well, there really isn't much to steal in here."

"About the tape."

"Yes. One recent morning the man checked and saw that the tape in the back camera was gone. It was an expensive tape, the best I could buy. The man didn't say anything that day, but the following day he told me about it and swore he saw Miss Flynn slip it into her purse. When I confronted Miss Flynn about the gas bill, I also asked her about the tape. She denied taking it, but her co-worker had no reason to lie. All things considered, I felt I had no option but to terminate Miss Flynn's employment."

Bellinger shook Hanson's hand. "Thank you, sir. You have helped more than you will possibly ever know. I'll be going now. Thanks again." Bellinger turned to leave, then hesitated and turned back. "Mr. Hanson, will you remember all this with the same detail in, say, two or three months? Maybe six?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"You could be testifying in a criminal trial."

Hanson looked like he might cry.

Bellinger went outside to his car and radioed dispatch, instructing them to locate Kerry and Baird and tell them to meet him at Well Done Charlie Flynn's apartment building. He had pulled out of Hanson's parking lot when he suddenly realized he did not know the address of his destination. He had to park at a convenience store and look up the address in a telephone directory.

As the three men climbed the front steps of the gray stone building, Bellinger said, "We're looking for a videotape. It could be our case. I think the Flynn woman was trying to buy insurance. You know, mess with me and the tape goes to the police, but obviously she never had the chance to set it up."

At the second floor door Baird broke the yellow crime scene tape. Once inside the apartment living room, they found the tape with ridiculous ease. There were two videotape cabinets, one on either side of the TV and VCR. Both cabinets were full of home-recorded tapes, and all but one had a label on the spine with a movie title written on it. Bellinger spotted the odd tape as soon as

Baird opened the doors of the cabinets.

"The gods are smiling on us if that's it," Baird said, handing the tape to Bellinger.

Bellinger said, "We watch it right now. That way we'll know. If this isn't it, we search."

Kerry turned on the TV, and Bellinger inserted the tape into the VCR. He bent over to read the button labels and pushed PLAY, then stepped back.

After a few seconds of blank screen, the picture appeared, the overhead door in the rear of Hanson's slowly rolling up. A bright red van backed in, and the door rolled down again.

"You can bet that isn't Hanson's van," Bellinger observed. "Red is irregular."

Tony the Blimp wiggled out of the passenger side and went to the rear of the van. The driver appeared from behind the van to join the Blimp.

"That's Tony Guarino. Do we know the other man?"

Kerry and Baird shook their heads.

"The Blimp will make him for us. Guaranteed."

A woman dressed in a pale blue jumpsuit appeared from the left pushing a gurney. The Blimp opened the back doors of the van.

Kerry said, "That's the Flynn woman." He pointed to a

framed photograph sitting on a side table, and Bellinger looked. Charlene Flynn had been pleasant looking, her face scattered with freckles and topped with red curly hair.

The Blimp and the other man tugged a man's body out of the rear of the van and plopped it onto the gurney. The man's face was bloody. Charlene Flynn wheeled the body offscreen to the left.

Bellinger said, "What I could see of the face I didn't recognize. That must have been the bodyguard."

In twenty seconds the woman was back with another gurney. The two men hauled another body out of the van and onto the gurney. The man had a neatly trimmed mustache and a dark spot in the middle of his forehead where a bullet had obviously gone in. The Flynn woman pushed the gurney offscreen.

"Him I made," Bellinger said. "That was Mendoza."

The Blimp slammed the van doors and the two men climbed back into the vehicle. In a few seconds the overhead door rose and the van pulled out into the night. The door came down again and then Charlene Flynn came into view from the right where she had obviously been operating the door. She walked toward the camera and out of

sight beneath it, then the screen went blank.

Bellinger rewound the tape, ejected it, slid it back into its jacket, and squeezed it into his coat pocket. He was feeling better than he had in weeks. He was almost jovial.

"That's it. That was eighty thousand dollars at work. The Flynn woman needed money. They gave her ten thousand a body to turn them into ashes. Then what was left of the competition went home and they didn't need her any more, but she knew too much so she had to die. Gentlemen, we have Carmine A.'s hide nailed to the wall. Let me tell you what is going to happen. We bring in Tony the Blimp to show him the tape. Then we will speak of accessory to murder one and thirty years in the joint. I know. I'll mention the awful food they serve in prison. That will be the clincher. The Blimp will fold like the world's biggest accordion. And who can he roll over on? Nobody but Frankie Ice, who had to be handling this business for Carmine A. And Ice we will own. He can't do time. We mention thirty years or life to him, and he will give up Carmine A. and his own

mother in the same breath. When Frankie Ice was in his twenties, he got eighteen months, and being locked up sent him right over the edge. He did the last fourteen in a psychiatric ward. He'll do anything to keep from going inside, and that includes telling stories about his boss. Men, this is indeed a glorious day."

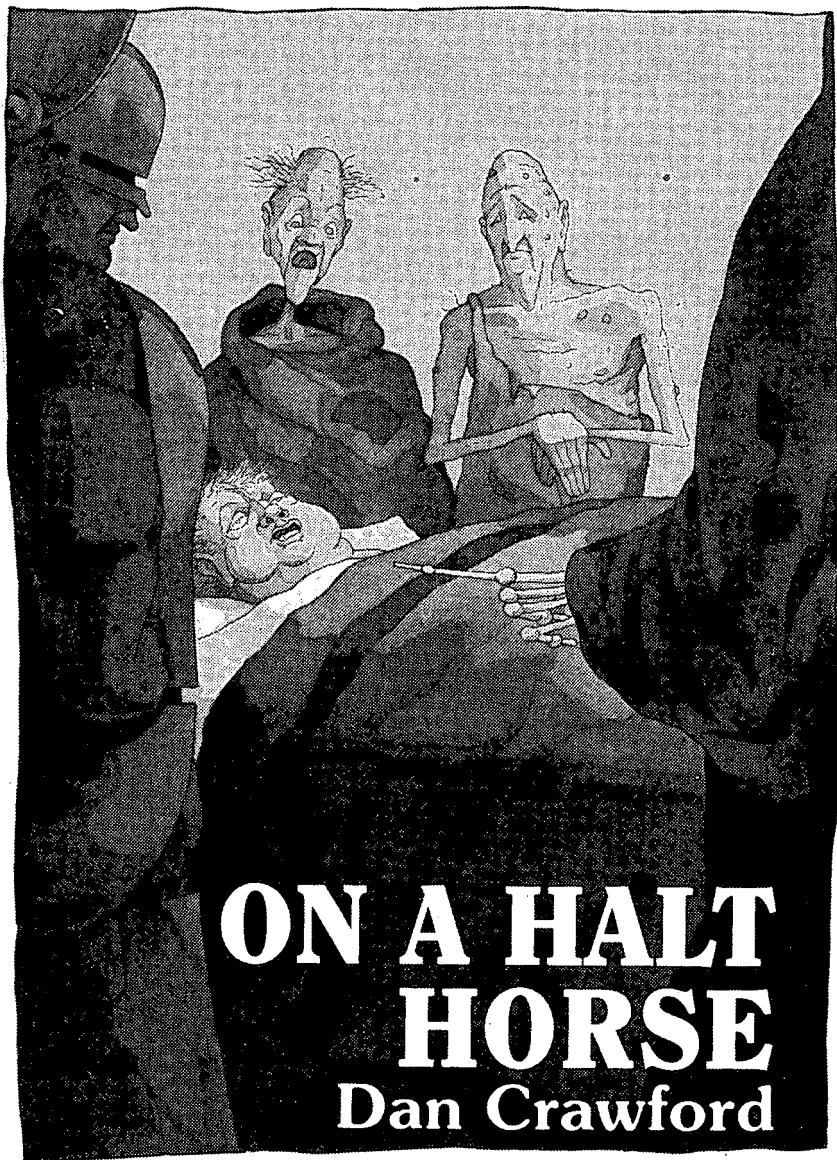
The two detectives murmured their agreement.

"I have a thought," Bellinger said. "Maybe the late Miss Flynn kept other souvenirs. I imagine the bodies were stripped of personal belongings before she got them, but you never know. Since we're here, why not look around? One of you take the bedroom, the other the kitchen and bathroom. I'll check in here."

Kerry and Baird went off in opposite directions. Bellinger stood in the middle of the living room and slowly turned until his gaze rested on the photograph of Charlene Flynn. He stopped and pulled the tape out of his pocket, looked at it, then back at the photograph. He grinned at the woman's image and winked, waving the tape in a salute.

"Well done, Charlie."

FICTION



ON A HALT HORSE

Dan Crawford

Illustration by Jim Adams

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The large round figure snored on, obviously unaware of the four imposing figures assembled around his bed.

"We can't do a thing while he's sleeping," intoned the skull within a dark hood. One bony hand rose to the alarm clock.

"That won't do any good," sighed the tall gaunt figure in grey robes. "He's forgotten to wind it again."

"Do we have to bother with this?" whined the thin man covered with spots. "We have so many other things to do today it makes me feel quite faint."

"Everything makes you feel faint." The big square man put out a muscled arm. "Come on, you! You've got to get up, you've got to get up."

"Oh!" The chubby slumberer sat up sharply. "Is it that time already?"

"Past." The big man kept his grip on the soft shoulder and pulled the rounder one from under the covers. "Let's go."

"We've got ever so many things to do," the spotted man told him.

"Oh dear, oh dear." The round man put pink toes this way and that, searching for a pair of bunny slippers just out of reach under the bed.

"No time for that," said the skeletal visitant, kicking the slippers farther back. "Where are your shoes?"

"Here's one," said the gaunt man, pulling it out of a flowerpot. "Where's your left one?"

"Which?" said the awakened man, rubbing his eyes.

"Come on, come on." The thickly muscled man in red armor pulled him upright. "You need your traveling clothes."

"They're around here somewhere." The man yawned, then sighed. "And I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"He hasn't had his breakfast yet!" cried the emaciated man.

The skeleton patted one plump shoulder. "Never mind. You'll just stop at McDonald's, the way you always do."

"Do I?" He scratched his forehead as the spotted man buckled the belt of his heavy armored trousers. "Oh yes, that egg thing. Eggs MacArthur? Something like that."

"That's it, that's it." The muscled man forced the rounded arms into a jacket matching the pants. "Where's your helmet?"

"Helmet," murmured the victim vaguely.

"Never mind. It's here, on his horse." The emaciated man opened the bathroom door. "He put his horse in the shower stall again."

It took all four to get the portly soul up into the saddle, and at that they needed six tries. At last, however, horse and rider set off down the road, moving with surprising speed for so slow-minded and slew-footed a pair.

"So," said Death, moving toward a grander steed at the hitching post, "we've got him up and away."

"My back will never be the same," complained Pestilence, patting his own feverish mount. "And you know this makes my ulcers act up."

"It's no picnic having Stupidity as a partner," Famine sighed.

War hoisted himself into his saddle. "Just remember: without him, none of the rest of us would have jobs."

And the four horsemen set off behind the fifth.

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FICTION

COP'S KID

Teddy Keller



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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I remember the night because it was two days after Billy Potter lost his job at the bowling alley.

Well, he didn't exactly lose his job. He was a pin setter, making a nickel a line. But when a big ol' power bowler fired his hook into the pocket, those pins like to exploded, and one of them bonked Billy smack in the forehead. Knocked him silly for about half an hour.

He was supposed to stay in bed all week, but not Billy. Not during summer vacation. Not when stay in bed meant sweat in bed. Billy's mom wanted Billy's dad to borrow the electric fan from Judge Andrews, who lived two blocks down, but Billy's dad said they weren't asking for any charity, and besides the judge was a fat toad who needed the fan worse than anybody.

Well, after dark when it was cooler, Billy and I played ring-the-doorbell-and-run. At the corner of the Shepler house there were stubby evergreens where we could hide. And the Methodist parsonage had a whole row of spirea bushes. Those folks pretty much laughed about finding nobody at the door. So we decided we'd ring the judge's doorbell.

We snuck close enough that we could see through the open windows and the lace curtains. The judge really did look like a fat toad, squatted in his big chair in the living room. Even at that distance I could make out the acne on his face and neck. He was reading the evening *Beacon*, and the big fan fluttered the pages. His horsey wife sat nearby, tending her knitting. Their big old bulldog snored at the judge's feet.

That was when Billy sat down on the sidewalk and said, "I think I better go home."

"Your head hurt?"

"Something awful."

Well, I sure hated to give up on the judge's doorbell, once we were that close. But I said, "Maybe you better."

"Maybe tomorrow," Billy said.

"Swell." And then I realized how awful he must've felt. "Can you make it home okay?"

"I wish we had my wagon for me to ride in."

That was Billy, always lending things and forgetting who to. I still had his football from last winter, but it had gone flat. The wagon would've been keen about now.

But Billy was kinda wobbly. So I went with him and hung onto his overalls so he wouldn't keel over, and got him to his front door.

He sort of tottered into the house, and I heard his mother say something, and next thing a light came on in the room he and his big brother fought over.

Well, that left me, myself, and I. It was too early to go home. So I sashayed over to the park, and I went to the fountain in the middle and had a big drink of cooling water. Then I walked past one of those big two-seater swings that'd hold four people or about eight kids at once, and the swing didn't squeak, so I swung and swung and imagined myself at midseason with the Cardinals and then it was World Series time and I was called in to bat for Pepper Martin. And I heard voices. Real voices.

There were some big kids moseying along the north side of the park right close to me. I stopped swinging and went over to see what they were up to. At first I thought maybe they were shooting at street lights, but there wasn't a BB gun in the bunch.

I sort of sauntered along with them for a while before they let on I was there. Then they all stopped and took a good look at whatever they could see of me in the dark.

"Well, if it ain't Big Ed," Joe Simpson said. "You ever gonna make it to five foot?"

I couldn't help it if I grew slow. I was about to tell them that, but Orville McNeil butted in.

"We gotta watch it, guys," he said. "The chief sent his kid to spy on us."

I couldn't help being the police chief's son, either. But at least I wasn't a preacher's kid. Bernie Foster caught more pure-D static than I did.

He was the one who said, "If the kid's a spy, he's really in trouble if he goes with us."

"Why's that?" I said, trying to be smart.

"It'd be one way to keep him quiet," Orville said.

And Joe said, "Yeah. He's our insurance policy."

The three of them got their heads together and they muttered and they looked at me and they laughed low and meaningful, as if they'd just figured how to skip school and not get caught. One of them said, "Come on." And I had no idea what I was getting into.

So I tagged along. I knew the town, but I didn't know where the big guys were headed in the dark. We were in a neighborhood with nice houses and big trees when the guys got to whispering and almost tiptoeing along the sidewalk.

We stopped in front of a two story house. There were lights downstairs and up, and I could make out Mr. and Mrs. Sorenson in the living room, listening to the radio. But the guys were looking up.

"Dang," Joe growled. "She's got her shade pulled."

Bernie bellyached about bad luck, and he said, "It's gotta be stifling in there. Maybe she'll put the shade up before she goes to bed."

The upstairs light went off. More from hearing it than seeing it, I knew the shade had gone up. Joe grumbled under his breath and Orville echoed him, and I finally figured out what we were up to. I didn't know whether this made us peeping Toms or not, but we were sure looking for a view.

We found one in the next block. The Brandon house had the parents and two kid brothers in the living room. The radio was half loud, and the boys were playing something on the floor, maybe checkers. There was one open lighted window upstairs. Oh boy.

Roxie Brandon was one of the prettiest girls in high school. I'd seen her up close, but the best time was when my sixth grade class visited orchestra and she showed how to play a violin. I'd sure never seen her like this.

Actually, all I could see of her was from the waist up. That's why Joe and Orville and Bernie kept stretching up on their toes to see more. But I saw more than I ever imagined I'd see.

Roxie had one of those wicker fans that the funeral home has their name on in church. And she was fanning her own front. And all she was wearing was a brassiere. And that flimsy thing did a poor job of containing all of Roxie. And I think I stopped breathing.

"Oh, man," Joe whispered, "is she ever built."

Bernie just sighed. "Would you look at that?"

"I done died and gone to heaven," Orville said.

If my mouth hadn't flapped open and a bug almost flew in, I wouldn't've noticed. But that diverted me. And just in time I saw one of the little brothers get up off the floor and head for the front door with the family dog.

Now there were dogs that attack and dogs that protect and dogs you'd trust to guard the bridge. But I knew this one for pure yap. I took off, and I didn't look back.

I was in the middle of the next block when I heard the first yap. And then a kid's yell. And then a man's shout. And then I turned on the speed.

Me huffing and puffing up the back steps and into the kitchen was nothing new to Mom. She just shook her head and gave me her I'm-trying-not-to-smile look. Mom was maybe the all-time good-natured mother, and she wore an apron as her badge of distinction. She had a round, jolly face, and she was overweight just enough to tell you she was a good cook with self-control. But if she said it once, she said it a thousand times. "If I had it to do over, I'd marry a thief or a burglar. I'm sure their wives sleep better."

"You see a ghost?" she asked. Without waiting for some big fib, she turned to her work and said, "The sheriff isn't here. We've got a pirate ship on Sand Creek."

Tomorrow she might call it cattle rustlers or a bank robbery, and she might even call Dad the chief. She said he looked like Tom Mix as a sheriff, but I thought he looked more like Tim McCoy as a U.S. marshal. Right now the smell of cookie dough would've stopped a stampede.

"What's up . . . really?" I said.

"All at the same time, we've got disturbing the peace at the Brandons' and prowlers at Judge Andrews' and somebody shooting at street lights and . . ." She turned from the breadboard and pointed a cookie cutter at me. "You wouldn't know anything about any of that, I suppose."

With my speed record getting home, I hadn't thought up any stories. All I could think to say was: "Dibs on licking the bowl."

Before either of us could say anything, we heard the Ford, the official police car, thump across the gutter and up the driveway. The car door slammed, and Dad was up the back steps in nothing flat. I scurried to a corner next to the pantry, and Mom waved the cookie cutter at the door. When Dad came in, he glanced at Mom and studied me for a second, and his face was grim.

I always hoped I'd grow up to look like my dad. He was built slim and muscular, and he had a Clark Gable mustache to go with his strong nose and iron jaw. In his dark blue uniform, he made high school girls ooh and ah.

"Street lights?" Mom asked.

"They must've missed," Dad said.

"The Brandons?"

"Probably just some kids going past." He gave me a look. "Set the dog to barking."

Mom got to the final question. "Everything hunky-dory with the judge?"

"No." Dad sat down at the breakfast table and pulled in a deep breath and let it out real slow. His face set into hard lines, and that meant whatever he said was strictly confidential. "Judge Andrews is missing."

Mom said, "Huh?"

And before I could think, I blurted, "But that can't—" Then I caught myself.

Judge Andrews had been sitting there, big as life like a fat toad, not that long ago. Maybe half an hour. Maybe more. I'd lost track. But I knew what I saw. Only I couldn't tell without getting me and the big guys in a pack of trouble.

For all Dad knew, I could've spent most of the evening right there in the kitchen watching Mom making cookies. I'd been warned before about ringing doorbells and running. "How would you like it if you were listening to the Lone Ranger and you went to the door and nobody was there?" And to watch a high school girl take off her blouse, even if her shade was up and I was clear out on the sidewalk . . . well, the chief's paddle would make a lasting impression. But my slip of the tongue whizzed right past Dad. His features changed from grim to troubled.

"Mrs. Andrews said she hadn't seen the judge since he went out for a walk right after supper."

Oh no. I knew better. Why would Mrs. Andrews say that? And what if I told nothing and then Billy Potter blabbed about what he and I had seen? Or maybe the big guys had been past there, too, and they'd seen the judge. And maybe they'd gone back.

Hey, yeah. Orville and Joe had been in some sort of trouble a year ago, and Judge Andrews . . . well, it wasn't exactly probation, but they were sure mad at him. And a preacher's kid like Bernie was always suspect, no matter what.

Could Orville and Joe and Bernie . . . what?

"Does the judge usually take a walk?" Mom asked. "He looks like he needs it."

Dad shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"And if he's missing. . . ." Mom puffed at a smudge of flour on her arm and glanced at the kitchen clock. "Supper wasn't that long ago. Maybe he walked over to the Fairmont ice cream store for dessert."

"He doesn't need that," Dad said and half smiled and shook his head.

That's when the telephone rang. Dad pushed up from the table

and hurried to the hall and grabbed the phone by its throat. He said, "Chief Arnold," into the mouthpiece before he got the receiver to his ear. He listened and grunted and listened and said, "Where?" and listened some more. Finally he said, "Don't touch anything. I'll be right there."

When he hung up and turned around, his face was gray and sweaty. He tilted his head to signal extreme confidentiality, and said, "The judge is dead."

Mom kinda gasped, but I didn't really grasp *dead*. Dead was James Cagney when the G-men tracked him down. Dead was Basil Rathbone when Errol Flynn won the swordfight. It was all clean and neat and well deserved.

"Where?" Mom asked.

"Beside Sand Creek. The Tenth Street Bridge."

Oh, I knew the timbers of that bridge, and the creek bank under it. Where rainwater from the street washed a little gully there was a place we could jump our bikes and make a banked turn and almost fall into the creek. I knew the bike trails clear to the First Street Bridge, and I was betting that the judge, like a fat toad, was stuffed into that little gully. Dead. Like Edward G. Robinson.

I remembered all the gangster movies and the cops and the FBI, and I realized I knew a lot about these things. I said, "What caliber of gun was he shot with?"

"Who said he was shot?" Dad said as he went out the back door.

We were silent for long moments. Mom turned again to the cookie dough and dipped her cutter in the flour and hunched her shoulders into the job. "A town this size, a night like this with everybody's windows open, we'd have heard a gunshot."

Yeah, everybody's windows open. The judge's. And Roxie Brandon's. And my lips were sealed.

I went up to my room then to think about the whole thing. A man missing and found dead didn't mean he hadn't died of natural causes. But there was something funny going on here, and I knew the judge had been . . .

I formed the word *murdered* in my mind, and a thrill of excitement skittered up my back. Murder was something else I didn't really grasp, but I knew it was real and it was in our town and my dad the chief was involved.

What I couldn't figure right off the bat was why Mrs. Andrews would say the judge went for a walk right after supper when Billy

and I saw him sitting in the living room at . . . oh, maybe eight thirty.

Well, I'd heard of dinner at eight. Maybe Mrs. Andrews fixed supper late at their house.

But what I couldn't figure next was the judge taking a walk. One time or another I guess I'd been outdoors playing ball all the daylight hours and playing hide and seek and kick the bucket a lot of dark hours, and I'd never seen the judge outside except when he was driving his big LaSalle to or from the courthouse.

Maybe he snuck around when nobody was looking and went to Fairmont's. He was the kind who could afford a dime for a double-dip cone.

So, if they had supper late and the judge went for a walk, maybe it wasn't *murder*.

But the Tenth Street Bridge wasn't on the way to ice cream. That bridge was on the way out of town, and it wasn't far from barns and silos and cows and horses and all that farm stuff. No, if the judge wanted to walk, he sure wouldn't head for the country. Probably. At least not to my way of thinking.

"Edward," Mom called up the stairs. "Are you in bed?"

"Not quite," I hollered back.

"You be sure to wash your feet before you crawl into bed. Those sheets were clean Saturday. And brush your teeth."

Boy, I'd been so deep in thought I'd forgotten about what Mom was doing in the kitchen. Now I could smell the hot oven and the ginger cookies, and I yelled, "I'll brush my teeth for a cookie."

"You'll have a cookie when I see clean feet, and then you'll brush your teeth."

So I sat on the edge of the tub and washed my feet and sailed down to the kitchen and had a warm cookie and then another and, when Mom wasn't looking, I stuck two in my pajama pocket. That, I told myself, was brain food, and I had to figure out about Judge Andrews.

Fortunately I got the cookies eaten before I went to bed. When I woke up with soggy crumbs stuck behind a back tooth, I realized I'd forgotten to brush my teeth. Dad gave me plenty to think about in the morning.

The telephone woke me. By the time I got to the kitchen, Dad was just finishing his eggs and bacon and toast. His eyes looked like caves, and his face kinda sagged. Mom nodded to me, poured

my orange juice, and broke a couple of eggs. I presided over the toaster by myself.

"Well," Dad said, his voice rough, "you never told me what you were doing last night."

"You never asked." That was a smart-aleck remark that could've got me a scolding. Not this morning.

"I'm asking now."

"Oh, I was just horsing around."

"Who with?"

"Oh . . . Billy. We were just . . . messing around."

Mom clucked and said, "He shouldn't have been out," which got the subject changed for the moment.

"Did you see Orville McNeil," Dad asked, "and Joe Simpson last night?"

Even if I should've, this was a question I hadn't counted on. I knew better'n to lie to the chief, and I couldn't think of anything to say except: "Yeah."

"Where?" Dad wanted to know.

"Oh, over in the park."

"What were they doing?"

Well, I sure wasn't going to say they were peeking at Roxie Brandon in her brassiere. I did say, "Oh, they were just horsing around."

"Were they anywhere near Judge Andrews' house?"

He asked about *them*, not *me*, and I truthfully said, "No." Then I thought to add: "Why?"

"Edward!" Mom shouted. "The toast is burning."

The bread had just started to burn, and I got it turned with the dark sides out. Mom brought my eggs and bacon to the table, and I got the toast buttered and started to eat. When I had swallowed the first bite, I asked Dad again. "Why do you want to know?"

"The judge was pretty hard on them for that business at the lumberyard last year."

Mom clucked again and said, "He called it vandalism."

"Scared them to death when he pronounced sentence, and then he said, 'Suspended.'" Dad took a sip of his coffee. "But they had to do a lot of cleanup. They didn't take it too well."

"I thought," Mom said, "he was going to send them to the reformatory."

Dad shook his head. "If he had, he might still be alive today."

I didn't grasp that one right away, either.

Mom cried out, "He what?" And then she said, "Wesley Arnold, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying . . ." Dad hunched over his coffee cup and stared into it. "We'll take a better look in daylight. But last night, right close to the body—" he glanced at me and my breakfast—"there was what looked like a buggy track, beside the gully, where the ground was soft."

"But what's that got to do with . . ." Mom let her thought trail away. "You mean, to transport a body? But where would those boys get a buggy?"

"Orville's been dating Margie Kessler. And Joe's been after her father to drive his horse and buggy in the Fourth of July parade."

Mom was the defensive mother. She said, "But that doesn't mean they had access to the buggy last night."

"They could've." Dad sipped his coffee and made a face. The java was probably cold. "The Kesslers are in Wichita for her uncle's funeral, and their hired man was in town last night . . . very drunk. So anybody could've swiped the buggy."

They both had their thoughts, and I had mine, and I finished off my eggs and bacon while I tried to sort out what Orville and Joe had time to do last night.

"Pushing or pulling a buggy around at night," Mom said. "That'd have been awfully conspicuous. And noisy. Even without a horse."

"I know," Dad said.

"You still haven't said what the . . ." She let her breath out slowly and looked at me and said to him: "What was the cause of death?"

"He was strangled," Dad said. "That's what Doc called about a while ago. May've been a leather strap."

That's when I piped up and said, "Like reins? Or a harness?" And then I could've bit my tongue off for being so smart.

"Or a belt," Mom said evenly, "or a shaving strop?"

"Any of those." Dad looked sad. "But there was more."

"What?" Mom asked.

"Didn't Joe and Orville both letter in football?"

I had a bad feeling, but I said, "First team."

Dad's face had that grim look. "There was a letter sweater snagged on a bush . . . near the body."

"But they weren't—" I got myself stopped late again. This time my slip didn't slip past.

"Who wasn't what?" Dad said.

If I said Orville and Joe weren't wearing sweaters, then we'd get into the whole business of how I knew and who was where and why. I tried one quick thought. "It was hot out last night. Those guys wouldn't've been wearing sweaters."

"That was my thought," Dad said. "But not everybody in town has a black and gold sweater."

Mom shook her head vigorously. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"Not a bit." Dad stared into the distance and shrugged. "A lot of crime doesn't make any sense."

For whatever reason *dead* hadn't made an impact on me, *crime* did. *Dead* was unreal, like the movies. *Crime* was what happened in somebody's hometown, and it was real. And some big kids, who took me along to look at windows, which wasn't a real crime, were close to being charged in a very real murder case. I could still say something that might help them, but it might just make it worse for them and for me, too. But if Bernie came forward . . .

Dad could've been reading my thoughts. He said, "Joe and Orville run around with Bernie Foster, and maybe he could alibi them. But as near as I can find out, Reverend Foster and the family headed out on vacation this morning. They always leave about four to get as far as possible before it gets hot."

"Don't they go to Estes Park?" I said. "You could call the sheriff there."

"The next door neighbor said he thought they were going to Yellowstone this time." Dad half smiled. "Reverend Foster's sister said the Grand Canyon."

That left Orville and Joe's fate with me again.

"I hate to even talk to those kids, much less haul them in," Dad said. "They can be as innocent as a snowman, but this's a small town, and once I start questioning anybody . . ." He didn't have to finish. "Everybody knows there was bad blood between them and the judge. But the sweater and the buggy track add up to violence."

For no reason, I asked, "Was it a whole buggy wheel track? I mean, the whole . . . uh . . . round part?"

"The circumference?" Mom completed it for me.

"No." Dad had obviously puzzled over that. "It was no more than a few inches. It was like the buggy had just barely backed off the pavement and just barely made an impression where the ground was soft. But it was narrow, about the width of a buggy wheel."

"And you're going to arrest two innocent boys?" The defensive mother was about to go on the warpath. "You're going to blacken their reputations in school and in the whole town, because of a sweater and what may have been a buggy wheel?"

I don't remember what Dad said. All of a sudden I had a picture in my mind of the Andrews living room and the shade up and the lace curtain and the big fan and the pages of the *Beacon* fluttering in the breeze. Mainly I had looked at the fat toad in his big chair, but I had noticed Mrs. Andrews, too.

And I remembered one time when Circle meeting was at our house, and some of the women were tidying up in the kitchen when I got home from school, and I heard one of them say, "Can you imagine? The judge is absolutely always right. And he makes her ask for every penny. That must be a terrible cross to bear." And another woman said, "If he was my husband, I'd put rat poison in his oatmeal."

The pictures in my mind changed to what must have happened after Billy Potter and I looked in that window. It was like I was watching a movie, and it was as vivid as any movie at the Regent Theater, only this was real.

"... and what would you say to that?" Dad was asking.

"Huh?" I grunted. The pictures faded in my mind, but I knew what they were and what they meant. I said, "I bet you find Billy Potter's coaster wagon behind his house, and I bet there'll be mud from the creekbank on one back wheel. Then you look in Mrs. Andrews' knitting bag. I bet you'll find yarn in the school colors, and I bet you find the murder weapon."

At that precise moment, for no reason I could figure, I got sick. I made it out the back door and across the porch before I lost my breakfast. After that, things got fuzzy for a time.

I heard Mom say something about nerves. And Dad said he sure didn't like the looks of things, but he had to find out. He left in the Ford.

Mom got me upstairs and made me take a dose of milk of magnesia, and I had to lie down for an hour or two even if I felt okay by then.

Long before noon, Mom pulled the shades and closed the doors, and then she fixed me a bowl of chicken soup. Which was just what I needed. Hot soup for the middle of a June day. I was just about done when the Ford drove in and Dad bounded up the back steps.

He had a look for me like I'd just been signed by the Cardinals, and he sat down across from me and smiled at me and grinned at Mom and said, "We've got a confession."

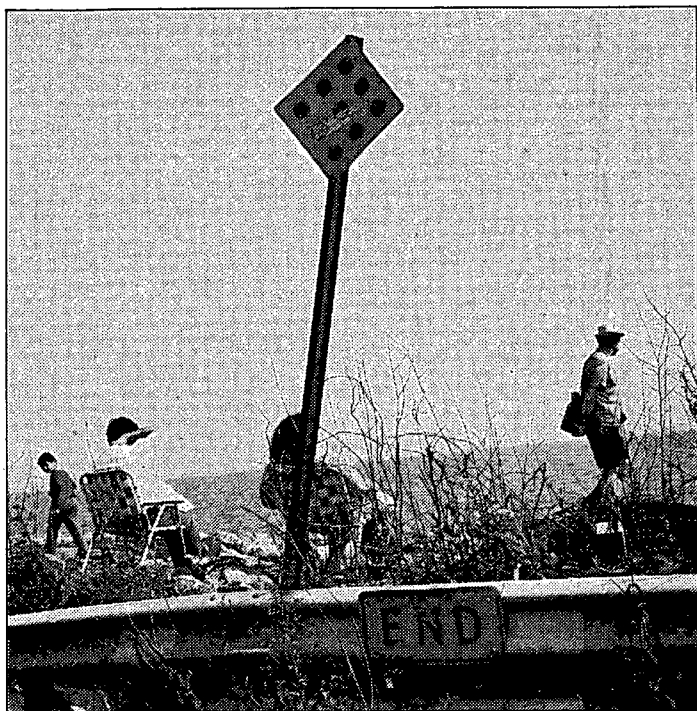
The saucer and cup rattled in Mom's hand like she might drop them. She said, "You got a what?"

"Mrs. Andrews," Dad said. He leaned back and gave me that big, happy look again. "She knitted the sweater, and she transported the body, all by herself. She'd been planning this since cold weather, but she didn't have a chance to swipe Billy Potter's coaster wagon until he got hurt. And she strangled her husband with the dog's leash. Doc found some of the judge's acne in the leather."

"But . . ." Mom real quick put the coffee cup down in front of Dad. She looked at him, and then she looked at me, only she wasn't the defensive mother now and she didn't have that big, happy look. She was worried and troubled, and she said to me: "How did you know . . . any of that?"

And Dad said, "To protect their sources, my officers are sworn to secrecy." And the look he gave me said *new bicycle* plain as day.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

A day at the beach in Nowheresville. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

Bamboo Viper

David K. Harford



Illustration by Ron Chironna

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I know this much, I wasn't all that thrilled about being on the convoy that morning traveling from Pleiku to L.Z. Victoria in the first place. Me? With only ten days left in-country, venturing out sixty miles from the security of the well-armed base camp? What if I ran head-on into the war? No way was I thrilled.

So, with the warm tropic air brushing against my cheek as the vehicles hit speeds of up to fifty miles per hour, I took a moment to realign my thoughts about what put me in the convoy in the first place—Mitch's phone call to me the night before.

There had been an urgent rush in his voice.

"You have to come up tomorrow, Carl," Mitch said, whispering hurriedly. "I've got something big coming down. Lots of money passing through the platoon. I can't get into it very well right now, but this thing's such, we'll want to follow up on it back in the World. I've got them cold—"

In the background I heard the sounds of someone coming into the PMO tent while Mitch was talking. He changed tempo suddenly, speaking more casually. "Okay, so our flight home leaves Cam Rahn Bay at two in the morning? I'll believe that when I'm sitting on that big

bird home. See you." And my good friend, a good provost marshal investigator too, hung up abruptly.

I twisted in the front seat alongside the MP sergeant who was driving the lead escort vehicle in the convoy. Before us stretched the paved highway linking Pleiku with Phu Bien; ahead, it wove through the mountains of Vietnam's Central Highlands, up into Hu.

Glancing behind me, beyond the MP manning the twin M-60 machine guns mounted in the turret of our rubber-tired, armored escort vehicle; beyond the radioman situated in the rear hatch, his steel pot pulled low over his eyes; back toward the sixty or so vehicles we were leading north, I thought: snake eyes. The MP driver and myself sitting in the front seat of the lead vehicle of this convoy, we are the eyes of this long snake. It was a deadly snake made of metal, rubber, and human flesh, worming its way through the jungles of that godforsaken land.

The convoy slithered along the highway, weaving through stands of bamboo and banana groves, rice paddies and jungle; through villages, past hastily constructed roadside pop stands the kids ran, and whorehouses teenage girls worked out of; past dirty-faced

kids begging for candy to be thrown from the convoy; past mama-sans watching these kids from a distance in their chicken-littered yards, one eye on their children, one eye distrustfully on the convoy; past the American tanks, dusters, and APC's lining both sides of the road for security, their gun barrels pointed away from the highway, into the wall of jungle.

Suddenly, breaking my thoughts, I heard the MP driver say, "Mike Papa Control. This is Mike Papa 100. We have L.Z. Victoria."

I raised my head, thoughts gone.

"Copy you have L.Z. Victoria," base camp replied through the radio. "Well, put it back. We'll need it for tomorrow."

With a roar of the engine the MP driver downshifted our vehicle, slowing for the nearly one hundred eighty degree turn we'd have to make to get into the 3rd Brigade perimeter gates.

Mitch was not waiting at the front gates as I expected, so since the driver had to pick up the mail, he drove me on to the area where the 6th MP Company's second platoon was situated.

The brigade base camp resembled a small town, about the size of the mountain town

in the hills of Pennsylvania south of Bradford where I was reared—where I'd soon be, too, in a little over a week. But instead of living in clapboard houses, in this town the soldiers lived in large tents; temporary hooches with wood floors and four foot high protective sandbagged walls built along the outside of each tent.

The entire compound was ringed with rolls of barbed wire and concertina wire. Inside those wires, guard bunkers had been built, and interspersed between the bunkers, for added security, was the ever-present scattering of GI-manned tanks, APC's, and dusters.

A system of dirt roads, oiled down by the engineers in a fruitless attempt to keep dust to a minimum, intertwined through the various units composing the brigade.

As if the brigade compound had been built in the bottom of a great bowl, mountains lush with jungle growth towered above the encampment on all sides. At these mountains batteries of U.S. artillery were pointed, pounding out a steady barrage of shells, sometimes twenty-four hours a day, in an effort to rout the Vietcong hiding there.

We continued weaving slowly along the dusty roads, past the tents of various units

where thin wisps of gray smoke from small cookfires trailed up in the still morning air. Finally we reached the 6th MP area and stopped.

I pulled myself from the vehicle, thanked the sergeant for the ride, and scanned the platoon area for Mitch, but I didn't see him anywhere around.

Instead I saw a group of MP's dressed in fatigue pants and olive-drab T-shirts, the sweat from the glaring sun glistening off their arms and faces. They labored at removing green sandbags layered around the platoon's underground bunker built in the middle of the MP area. As one man gingerly grabbed a sandbag, then quickly jerked it up, another MP stood next to him with a shovel raised, poised to smack and kill whatever they expected to find under the sandbag. I assumed rats or scorpions.

Leaning on their shovels, they watched as I neared the tent flaps of the PMO, where I could hear the clattering of a typewriter and someone inside the tent swearing softly.

The MP behind the desk manning the phone and the radio stopped typing when I entered. In a far corner of the tent sat Lieutenant Williams slouched in a chair, his black face bowed, the thick fingers of

his hands pressed together as if praying. Only his eyes moved, following me around the tent. The MP, whom I had never seen before, said nothing either; instead, he rested his arms along his desk and stared down at the report curled in his typewriter.

It was hard to ignore the heavy air of solemnity pressing down in the dead space of the tent. I removed the weight of my steel pot and flak jacket and laid them across a chair.

I was about to break the silence and ask where Mitch was when Lieutenant Williams uncrossed a long leg and rose slowly, as if it required great strength for him to move.

"Colson," he said to the MP, "I want to talk with Mr. Hatchett alone. Go see if the guys have found anything."

Colson pushed blond hair back across his forehead. "Sir, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish—"

"Sergeant," Williams said sharply, "I *do* mind. Now, get out there like I told you."

"Yes, sir," Colson said, pushing back in his chair, rising quickly. "I'm sorry, sir."

I was taken aback a bit by Williams' testiness. Normally he was one of the most laid-back officers I knew.

Williams drew in a breath. "All right. All right. Just go,"

he said to Colson. "And make sure everything in Mitch's hooch is in order, too."

"It is, sir." Colson said as he ducked out the tent flaps.

During the next few long moments of silence, that weighty, funeral parlor solemnity poured back in around Williams and me like loose sand pouring into a large hole. If I was a little uncomfortable before, it was suddenly becoming unbearable, suffocating.

"Mitch around, lieutenant?" I asked.

Williams jammed his hands deep into his fatigue pants pockets, frowning. "Mitch is dead, Mr. Hatchett."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"We found him in his cot this morn—"

"Whaaaaat?" I heard myself say. Maybe it was the sweltering heat trapped in the canvas tent, or that no air seemed to be stirring at all, but suddenly I felt flushed and faint and my knees weakened. I leaned to steady myself on the desk.

"I know you two were good friends. He admired you—"

"How'd he die?"

Williams sucked in more air and let it out in a long exasperated sigh. "Are you ready for this? He was snakebit, of all things."

"Snakebit?"

"A bamboo viper. Sometimes known as a two-step snake. You've got two steps after you're bit to get medical attention. Mitch probably never knew he was bit; probably never woke up. Got him right under the eye. We were able to kill the snake, and now I've got the guys out there searching the entire area for any more." He paced within the small confines of the tent. "How it managed to crawl into Mitch's cot while he was sleeping," Lieutenant Williams said wearily, "I'll never know."

"The lieutenant told me to put you up in Mitch's hooch," Colson commented as I trailed behind him through one of the larger tents used as sleeping quarters. "I'm in here." He motioned with his hand at a sleeping area we passed about dead center of the long span of tent.

Each individual sleeping area was enclosed in a small cubicle to allow each MP a bit of privacy. Mitch's cubicle was all the way at the rear of the tent on the right.

Still numb, I followed the E-5 wordlessly, watching the back of his head bob as he spoke. But as the fog of my disbelief began to rise, clearing my thoughts, I kept recalling

snatches of my phone conversation the night before with Mitch: *I've got something big coming down . . . lots of money . . . this platoon . . . got them cold.* Then someone coming into the PMO where Mitch was probably calling from.

"Well, here we are. It's not Howard Johnson's, but—" Colson let his voice trail off, stepping aside to allow me to enter the cubicle first.

Inside Mitch's quarters, I laid my flak jacket and helmet on a makeshift desk solidly constructed from ammo crates. Quickly I scanned the remnants of Mitch's life.

Mitch was a reader, and a small stack of bent and worn paperback mystery novels, passed around and read by many, were piled on the floor near his cot.

I sensed Sergeant Colson watching me while I pawed through some of Mitch's belongings, and then he said, "I still can't believe it, Mr. Hatchett. Goddamn snakes. Goddamn country. Goddamn war. He was this short." He held up his thumb and index finger about a quarter of an inch apart, a gesture indicating how "short" a man was, how much time he had left in-country. The narrower the gap, the shorter a man was.

"I'm aware of that, Colson," I snapped at him, surprised now by my own testiness.

A calendar for August 1970, advertising the Leyland Hotel in Springville, New York, hung on one wall. The twenty-ninth of August was circled in dark blue ink with "HOME" written under it. Days one through nineteen had been scratched out. I unfolded a partly open map of New York State and saw where Mitch had circled, in dark blue ink, Springville, New York. Below that, in the northernmost part of Pennsylvania, was Bradford. I crumpled the map up in my fists.

"Where's Mitch now? Where's his body, I mean?" I asked.

"Grave Registration," Colson replied.

"Call over there and tell them not to send the body to base camp until I've had a chance to look at it."

"Will you be going back to base camp tomorrow, Mr. Hatchett? I can make the arrangements for you."

I studied a framed picture of Mitch's wife and daughter. "No. Wait on that until I tell you differently." I was speaking to Colson, but looking at the photographed woman's young, pretty face. Elaine. I'd gotten a card from her at Christmas. *Mitch has told me so much*

about you, the card said. Take care of him, Mr. Hatchett. Please. We so need him here.

"Also, Colson, when you talk to Grave Registration, ask them if they know what has to be done for someone to get permission to accompany a body back to the States. Get me a timeframe on that."

"Will do. Didn't you guys live close to each other?"

"Fifty miles or so. I'm from near Bradford, Pennsylvania."

"Bradford," Colson said thoughtfully. "I've heard of it. Isn't that where the Zippo lighter is made? My sister sells a lot of Zippos in her shop."

"They're popular items, and yes, they're made there. Now, who found Mitch, and is this pretty much how the room was?"

"Oh yes, sir. The lieutenant more or less put it off limits until you got here. What happened is this. Peterson came in this morning to wake Mitch—"

"Who's Peterson?" I sat in the folding chair in front of Mitch's desk and stretched my long legs. Williams had been in a hurry to meet with the brigade commander to report the details of Mitch's death, so he hadn't had time to go over the details with me. The account I was about to hear I was hearing for the first time.

"SP/4 Peterson is the new platoon investigator, Mitch's replacement. He's been working with Mitch the last two weeks. Anyway, we had an S.I.R. this morning. Some officer got shot way the hell out in the boonies at some hilltop parameter. Probably a fragging. Peterson wasn't sure what to do to get there, so he came in to wake Mitch. And that's when we found him. The damn snake was in the bed curled up by Mitch's face. They shook it out, and someone shot it."

Mitch's mosquito netting, required by army regulations to be draped over his cot at night, was raised on one side and tossed over the top of the netting canopy. "Is this how his bed was, do you know?" I asked Colson. "The netting up?"

Colson thought for a moment. "Probably not, but I couldn't say for sure, Mr. Hatchett. By the time I got here, the lieutenant, Peterson, Mullens, and Vinh, our interpreter, were already here; had already shot the snake. Probably Mullens did that—"

Suddenly from outside the tent near the bunker where the detail of MP's was searching for snakes came a loud commotion, loud enough that I could hear it clear across the platoon area. "There they are. Get them. Hit 'em hard. Don't touch that,

Vinh, there may be more under there. Look at them all."

I peered out the side of the tent, open to let fresh air pass through Mitch's sleeping area. I could see shovels being slammed to the ground and MP's light-footing it and hopping around the bunker. "Careful," someone admonished, "those baby snakes are just as deadly as the big ones."

"Sounds like they found a nest," Colson remarked peering over my shoulder. "Mullens was right."

"And who's this Mullens?"

"New guy. Been here only a month or so. Claims he was some kind of snake handler or expert on snakes back in the World. We call him Snake. Fits him, in a way. I normally don't believe everything Mullens mouths off about, though." Colson didn't bother hiding his animosity towards Mullens. "But I have to admit, he was right. He said there could very well be a nest of those snakes burrowed into the sandbags 'cause it's warm there."

One thing I had to know and I hoped Colson, as CQ, might know, was whether anyone had heard anything unusual the night before—an argument, Mitch thrashing around in bed, anything to give me a time reference.

"Afraid not, Mr. Hatchett. Most everyone was down in the bunker last night. One of the guys turned twenty yesterday, so we had a little party for him. Must have been a lulu because I had a tough time getting everyone out of bed this morning. Those guys not on duty at the main gate, on patrol or whatever, were down in the bunker. I, of course, worked CQ all night last night in the PMO, from midnight on."

Just then a Vietnamese and a tall, redheaded GI barged into the room. The nametag on the GI's shirt told me I was about to meet "Snake" Mullens.

The Vietnamese carried a large green viper, obviously dead. It resembled a common, but harmless, green grass snake found back home, only it was much longer and as thick as one inch copper tubing. Nearly cut in half, the two foot length of viper was draped over Vinh's outstretched hands. Vinh thrust the dead snake right under my nose, and I jerked back.

"Okay we shop its head off now, Mr. Hashett?" Vinh asked, prancing nervously, anxiously.

I stepped back from Vinh and the snake, but he kept moving in on me with it. "What do you mean, you want to chop its head off?" I asked.

"Shop its head off, then bury both in different holes. No way snake can come back at night and bite man who kill it."

"Superstition, sir," Mullens interpreted.

"And you're Mullens, I see."

Mullens, not knowing whether to salute me or not, extended his hand. "John Mullens, Pfc, sir."

"You're the snake expert?" I had let go of his firm grip.

"Well, I guess, more or less. But what Vinh is saying is he believes that if he beheads the snake and buries the body and head separately, then the snake won't bite the guy who killed it. Superstition, like I said, and like most superstitions it's based on some truth. We have the same thing back in the World. Never touch a dead rattlesnake until sundown."

Never touch them at all is how I felt about snakes.

"What happens is," Mullens was explaining, "a snake has muscle reflexes, and even after it's been dead for hours it can and will still spin around and bite you, bite even its own self."

"He's been wanting to bury it since we shot it," Colson offered. "We thought you might want to see it first."

I noted unfriendly glances exchanged between Colson and Mullens. I nodded, approving of their holding the snake for me.

Vinh, who had a firm hold of the snake right behind its head, thrust the thing even closer to my face.

Trying to ignore it, brushing at it, I asked Mullens, "You ever handle anything like this?"

"I've handled mostly rattlers, copperheads, and a couple of water moccasins, but we haven't got anything quite this deadly back home. This is one mean snake. But I suppose I could handle a live one if I needed. Once you pin its head down and grab it behind the neck, it can't bite you unless you do something stupid like drop it. In handling them, you aren't allowed any mistakes."

"Mr. Hashett?" Vinh pushed the viper so close to my nose I could smell its pungent, musty odor.

"Yes, Vinh, yes. Go. *Shop* it. *Shop* it. Just keep the damn thing out of my face."

Vinh spun around and ran out, carrying the dead bamboo viper with him.

"And bury it good and deep," Mullens yelled after him. "I'm the one who shot it," he explained to me. "Can't be too careful."

"Mullens, how do you figure this snake got in here?"

Mullens walked across the cubicle to the open tent side. Immediately outside the tent a

wall of sandbags had been built to provide protection from incoming mortar rounds. The Pfc laid his hand on the top sun-warmed sandbag. "The way I figure, the snake may have been crawling along the sandbags here last night, maybe searching for food. Then it either fell or crawled into Mitch's bed."

Colson interrupted. "Excuse me, sir, but if you don't need me, I've been up all night, and I'd like to get some sleep before it gets too hot."

"I'll need one more thing from you, but you can get it for me tonight, after you've slept."

Colson shot me an irritated look.

"I'm going to need an accounting of where everyone was last night; those on duty, those in the bunker at the party."

Colson scowled. "Everyone? Lieutenant Williams, too? What do you need all that for?"

"Sergeant, just get me what I ask for," I shot back.

Colson whirled and stomped out of the cubicle, muttering loud enough that I could hear, "Can't anyone else do anything around here?"

Rubbing his hand through his short GI haircut, Mullens commented, "Colson's a jerk, sir." Then his face softened a bit. "There's one more thing I

ought to tell you, Mr. Hatchett."

I was leafing through some of Mitch's notes on his desk, listening to what Mullens was about to add.

"The snake Vinh has, the one that killed Mitch, is a female. We found its nest. I'm sure we've killed all the babies. But these critters often run in pairs. What I'm saying is, out in this compound, under any of the thousands of sandbags, there's at least one more viper crawling around. Adult size. Fun, huh?"

I was reading something that had caught my eye in Mitch's notes. "Yeah, Mullens. Great fun. I'll watch where I step." I glanced again at Mitch's notes, particularly at the note with my name on it. *And how I sleep*, I thought.

Unbuttoning my fatigue shirt, plopping down into the folding chair, I pushed things aside at Mitch's desk, grabbed my list, and drew a line through the first item on it, so that my list of things left to do looked like this:

~~See G.R. re TOD~~

See Peterson

Check Colson's list

See Lt. Williams.

From my pocket where I'd stuffed it for safekeeping, I pulled the piece of notepaper I'd come across among Mitch's notes.

Mitch kept good notes, thorough notes, neat notes. Poring over them, I remembered some of the cases, some of them we'd worked on together.

One page had NGUYEN-TRAI printed on it in Mitch's familiar, legible block letters, crowded together the way Mitch always crowded his agenda to accomplish the most he could in a day. I remembered Nguyen Trai. Trai was the Vietnamese civilian responsible for all the Vietnamese working on L.Z. Victoria. Mitch caught him redhanded dealing in stolen food supplies Trai bought from a grunt who was supposed to be shipping the food out to the bush to his buddies. Result: Trai ousted. Grunt court-martialed.

The note I'd found with my name on it said:

19AUGUST
RECOILANYVIPER
HATCHETT

Mentally I separated the middle line: RECOIL ANY VIPER. Or was it: RE: COIL ANY VIPER? I scanned Mitch's notes again, and sure enough I saw he used "re" frequently,

such as, NGUYEN TRAI RE BLACKMARKET, squeezed together.

I puzzled over it a moment and then set it aside, realizing it made little difference whether it was RE: COIL ANY VIPER or RECOIL ANY VIPER, since I had no idea what the note may have been referring to any way I read it.

The date of the note was the day before, the day Mitch called.

Just then, Sergeant Colson stomped into the cubicle and tossed his list onto the desk in front of me.

"Here's your list of where everyone was last night, Mr. Hatchett," he said unpleasantly. "I wanted to get it done so I wouldn't have to screw around with it tonight. The L.Z. is gearing up for a major VC offensive sometime soon, and if it comes tonight, there'll be no time for any of this. Anything else I can do for you, *sir*?"

I ignored his curtness. "No," I said. "Go get some sleep."

Colson spun around and headed for his cubicle down the hall.

Scanning the list, I saw that ten MP's were on various duties the night before: bunker, BTOC guard, perimeter patrol. Twenty-two were at the party, which broke up around two thirty A.M. Three said they were

in bed. Mitch had attended the party but left for bed around midnight. A little tipsy, Colson footnoted.

Lieutenant Williams' name was not listed. Neither was Vinh's.

Evidently, Mitch was on to something big going on in the MP area. That could be anything from major drug dealing to blackmarket. Whoever was involved might have come into the PMO while Mitch was talking to me. Had the man been eavesdropping, overheard Mitch's entire conversation from outside the open PMO tent, and feared he was about to be brought down? After all, I had no difficulty hearing Colson inside swearing and typing when I arrived. Then this guy arranges a sleeping partner for Mitch? When Mitch said we could follow up on this back home, he was, of course, referring to the investigation business we were going to be starting. That led me to thinking about a Stateside connection, which in turn meant drugs was a good bet: pot, opium. Either was readily available and often mailed home. *Lots of money passing through here.* Drugs or not, it'd help to know where every man was from back in the States.

Or was his death a tragic, and coincidental, act of nature?

Re Coil Any Viper Hatchett. I repeated to myself, giving Mitch's note one final look-see. Too much ado about snakes.

On my list I drew a line through "Check Colson's list." Then I added, "Hometowns" at the bottom. "G.R. re TOD" I'd taken care of.

The Grave Registration area was set up in a small metal air-conditioned cubicle atop a knoll near the Brigade Tactical Operation Center, BTOC.

The doctor in charge, a major, was a major mess.

"Time of death?" he asked, pacing about the enclosed area. "Time of death? Who cares? Who cares what time he died? He died. Time is meaningless here. No one cares."

I stood at the feet of Mitch's body lying in a long row of other dead GI's killed in action in a recent firefight near Phu Bien. Wearing a drawn, emotionless expression, an enlisted man rifled through blood-smeared pockets for personal effects, tagging the bodies, collecting dogtags, flipping the bodies over as if the dead GI's were slabs of beef being prepared for market.

Mitch's cheek was bloated and swollen and colored an ugly deep purple. I turned my head from the sight of his face and from his twisted fingers

curled and stiff with rigor mortis.

"Time of death?" The major was still rambling on. "On that one there, time of death is one thirteen A.M., or about that."

I snapped my head around. "How can you be so sure?"

"His watch, man, his watch. In his convulsions, he must have smacked his wrist and broken his watch. Stopped at one thirteen. Unless of course he wore it broken. And why not? Time is meaningless here. Want the cause, too? Want the cause?"

"I already know—"

"You don't know nothing. The cause of death is war. Snakebit by war. Ha, ha. All these boys here—snakebit by one viper, OD in color, man." He frowned. "Christ, I've got two his age."

An artillery gun went off, booming so loud the ground around me shook, and I jumped. When I turned in the chair at Mitch's desk, I was startled to see Lieutenant Williams standing in the doorway, saying nothing, just watching me. God knows how long he'd been there.

"I didn't want to disturb your thoughts," he said, coming into the room, sliding his baseball cap off his head, crumpling it

in his large hands. He lowered himself onto Mitch's cot.

"You're just the person I was fixing to go see," I said to him. "How was your visit to the brigade CO?"

He grunted at the floor. "The colonel was all over me. Up one side and down the other. How could I allow my platoon area to become infested with snakes? Like I knew they were here. Where was everyone else? How's this going to look, lieutenant, he asked. How the hell's this going to look? Christ, I lose a good man, and Colonel Bandy's worried about how it's going to look. Damn white man's army."

I felt a pang of sympathy for Williams.

But I was nearing a crucial point. Sometime soon I was going to be forced to tip my hand a bit; reveal some of my suspicions about Mitch's death to someone in the platoon.

My problem was who among the thirty-one MP's to trust?

I approached it cautiously. "When's Peterson returning?"

Lieutenant Williams raised his head slowly. "He just radioed in. He's going to stay out there tonight. Seems some of the grunts involved in the fragging are out in the bush. Christ, they're killing their own officers now. You watch, some black'll hang for it." He rubbed

the back of his neck; the skin of his muscular arms was as black as the butt of an M-16.

The racial remark was a side of Williams I'd never seen before. What I knew of him through Mitch, Lieutenant Williams was a good, conscientious officer. Fair. Color-blind.

"If need be, I'll catch a chopper out to see him tomorrow. Maybe he could use a hand." I sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to do that, but . . .

"I know he didn't have much time to learn the ropes. He's a good man, though. He'll pick it up." Williams leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin cupped in his hands, frowning.

I turned around slowly and unfolded Colson's list on the desk. "Were you at the party last night?" I asked.

"I stopped in and wished Pitman a happy birthday about ten thirty or so. But I didn't stay long. How can the guys talk about me or curse me if I'm standing right there?" Williams grinned for the first time, however slightly. "Why'd you ask that?"

The crucial point was nearing.

"There are several things I'd like you to do for me," I said, trying to measure each word, looking for safe ground to travel.

"Oh?" Williams sat up, alert.

"Can you get me a list of where every man in this platoon is from back in the States?"

He nodded his head firmly. "I can. Everyone on the day he reported here for duty filled out an index card for me. They have that information at base camp in their 201's, but it seemed easier if I had it here, too. They contain hometowns, next of kin, phone numbers. I just pulled Mitch's out. I have to write his wife. Can you tell me why you want this?"

I leaned way back in the chair, crossing my legs, and searched Williams' face. So far as I knew, everyone viewed Mitch's death as an unfortunate accident. But if it wasn't, and I alerted the wrong guy, I could find myself waking with an unwanted bunkmate of the slithering, poisonous kind.

I chose my safest route. "Let's just say I have reason to believe Mitch was involved in an investigation of someone here. Something was going on that Mitch found out about."

"In this platoon?" Williams sat back, genuinely astounded.

"In this platoon, yes. Understand, his death may have nothing to do with that. But I have to check it out. Have you any idea what he may have been working on?"

"I'm sorry. Really. Mitch kept to himself. I never interfered with him. He had access to Vinh any time he needed an interpreter, access to a jeep any time he needed it. He seemed to work better if I left him alone. He was very trustworthy."

"Where are you from back in the States, lieutenant?"

The question caught him off guard. Angling his head, he eyed me curiously. "Cleveland," he said. "East of Cleveland." His lower lip curled. "You believe someone here put that snake in his bed, don't you?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'd appreciate it if you kept this under your hat. I really would."

"I don't blame you." He rose, nervously twisting his cap in his hands. "I'll get you that list."

"One other thing, lieutenant. Can anybody go in and out of the PMO as they want, or do you have it restricted to, say, only on-duty personnel?"

He leaned wearily against the wooden frame of the cubicle. "I do try to keep the traffic down, but, no, actually anyone can come and go. The mail's in there; duty roster is in there."

"That's what I was afraid of," I said, glancing out the open tent, out to where a dozen MP's milled around the bunker, jok-

ing, poking sticks at the mass of dead baby bamboo vipers.

I didn't sleep well that night. Not at all well.

I spent most of the night tossing restlessly, drifting in and out of stages of unconsciousness, trapped between light sleep and complete slumber, trapped in that eerie realm where dreams and nightmares are more vivid, where reality mingles with the dreamworld, somehow misshaping it into grotesque visions of Mitch, snakes, even twisted visions of Nicole.

It didn't help that Mitch's cot creaked and groaned every time I moved, that the ever-present, powerful odor of mildew permeated the air in the small cubicle, and that the cot itself was too narrow and too short for comfort. All of these contributed to my restlessness.

In the last of a series of visions parading through my light sleep stage, I saw a line of soldiers in bloodstained fatigues marching in formation inside a barbed wire compound. Outside the barbed wire stood Nicole, my ex-wife, her head bowed, maybe in shame, maybe in prayer. I tried calling to her, but the noise of the ever-increasing number of bloodied soldiers marching drowned out my words. Nicole raised her

head and looked at me, and I saw she was crying and pointing sharply at the soldiers. One man turned towards me, allowing me to see a large, ugly, purple bruise on the white skin of his cheek. But when he opened his mouth to speak, no sound came out; only a snake, green, thick, and foul-smelling, slithered out between his lips. Suddenly all the soldiers had snakes oozing from their mouths.

Watching these soldiers, standing inside the barbed wire, I tried again to call to Nicole. But when I opened my mouth, the only thing that came out was the head of a large viper.

That's when I noticed how pale my skin was and how much blood I had all over my fatigues.

The chopper banked so steeply I was surprised the door gunner didn't fall out. We'd flown due west to a small firebase near the Cambodian border, if we weren't already in Cambodia.

When he landed, the pilot didn't set his bird directly onto the ground, but hovered about a foot above it, the chopper's blades rotating, revved to full force, just in case Charlie was nearby wanting to pop it with

a mortar and the pilot had to get out of there fast.

I slid by the door gunner, and the Huey lifted and banked in a stinging flurry of sand, grit, and pebbles and was gone.

Eyeing me suspiciously, the infantry grunts dressed in T-shirts and flak jackets, steel pots baking their brains in the hot sun, went about their work of fortifying their small base: filling sandbags, setting claymores, and positioning their M-60 machine guns to give them the best field of fire.

I had come to expect suspicion from grunts in the field. After all, I represented the law in a place where the only law they recognized was survival.

Completely encircling the perimeter, the jungle rose as a huge wall of vegetation a scant twenty yards away, and I shuddered, knowing that on the isolated mountaintop L.Z. with only a few strands of barbed wire between the jungle and me I was deeper into the belly of the beastly war than I'd ever expected to be this late (now only nine days left) in my tour.

I found Peterson perched on a pile of sandbags, writing up notes from his many interviews. At the slightest loud noise, he jerked his head up and around, his eyes nervously scanning the area like a trapped wild animal.

Like Lieutenant Williams, Peterson was also black.

"How you getting along?" I asked Mitch's replacement before he knew I was standing over him.

He seemed relieved to see a friendly face. "Oh, how are you, Mr. Hatchett. Colson radioed me yesterday that you were here. How am I doing? Christ, I can't get anything out of these guys."

"Well, let's not expect to solve it in one sitting. Expect to run into a bit of a problem out here. Most of these infantry units are pretty close groups."

I took a seat next to Peterson on the sandbags and began leafing through some of his notes. Mitch had taught him to take thorough notes, I saw. "What you want to do in these cases is to get the names of people having statements, draw yourself a map of the area, then get your butt off this hill. Interview those involved back at L.Z. Victoria where it's safer. Make them come to you. You're in charge. If you run into any problems with that, call the C.I.D. in Pleiku. We'll straighten them out."

Peterson listened, nodding his head. "There was no shooting here as reported yesterday," he said. He looked down at his pages of notes. "Somebody put a grenade with the pin

pulled under his pillow. The weight of the pillow kept it from going off, but the first time he moved—there went his head."

I told Peterson, "Don't ignore the possibility he might have slept with that grenade under his pillow and it just went off."

"I can tell you this much. No one seems terribly upset over it. Four or five guys have told me this Lewie was screwy, a real hard-ass." He set his papers aside and weighted them down with a rock. "I'm sorry I didn't get to spend as much time with Mitch as—" His voice trailed off, as if he'd just remembered Mitch was dead. He suddenly whipped his head around when someone dropped a heavy piece of metal, creating a deafening crash. "I'm sorry, too, about Mitch," he said, relaxing once he saw what had caused the loud noise. "Mitch told me a lot about you; how you guys were going to go into business together and all that. Damn snakes."

I seized the moment. "Well, that's what I want to talk to you about, Peterson. This last week, while you were training with Mitch, did he happen to let you in on an investigation he had going of someone in your MP platoon?" During my talk with Mullens earlier that morning down in the bunker,

before I flew out to the L.Z. Peterson was on, much to my dismay I had discovered I no longer needed to be discreet. According to Mullens, the entire platoon already knew I wasn't convinced that snake just fell into Mitch's bed.

"In our platoon?" Peterson squinted up into the bright tropical sun. "No, nothing like that."

"Anything unusual he did or said this last week?"

"You know, he kept to himself pretty much. Unless you're talking about things like the An Khe Laundry Shop."

"What about it?"

"In Phu Bien. It's where we take our laundry. There's also a place in the back for guys to get laid. Ever since the 3rd Brigade has been here, the MP's in our unit have gotten free sex when we take in our laundry so we won't bust the place and put it off limits. You know how that works."

Indeed I did.

"And Mitch was going there, is that it?"

"Yeah, but not for sex. The VD around here scared him, I think. But he was really interested in the place the last week. We went there four or five times. But you know, a couple of things struck me funny about that. Mitch said he had

to talk with the guy who owns the shop. You know who that is? A guy named Trai."

"Trai?" I asked, surprised. "Nguyen Trai?"

Peterson's head bobbed up and down. "Trai. Same Trai Mitch had tossed off post awhile back. Now, you understand this laundry shop slash whorehouse is also slash a local market of sorts. You can buy just about anything American there: lighters, American cigarettes, beer. Probably military stuff, too. I figured Mitch's sudden interest had something to do with blackmarketing, what with Trai's history and all."

"Did he mention blackmarketing?"

"No. That was just my assumption. I stayed out in the jeep mostly. Leave it unguarded and them damn kids will have it stripped clean by the time you get back."

"Any mention of drugs and this An Khe shop?"

"No. But that doesn't mean he wasn't onto that. I'm sure drugs are available inside the shop, too."

I took a moment to digest this information.

"But the other thing that struck me funny was Vinh."

"What about Vinh?"

"Trai speaks English, but not real well, so Mitch needed an interpreter. But he didn't use

Vinh. He used a Montagnard."

More to digest. "That's interesting. Did he say why?"

Peterson shook his head. "He told me he'd let me in on it when he had it all together. That was typical Mitch."

"Where's this Montagnard now?"

"Mitch borrowed him from some infantry unit. They seem to prefer the Montagnards over the Vietnamese. But I have no idea which unit."

I quizzed Peterson about the party the night Mitch was bit. Had he heard an argument; anything unusual, especially between the hours of one and two in the morning; did anyone leave the party about that time and come back?

He told me frankly he'd set out to get drunk that night and he was proud of the fine job he'd done. That is, until he awoke the next morning with a hang-over that made his head so sensitive that flies landing on the tent touched down too loudly. No, he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. Just a bunch of guys getting drunk, celebrating.

I rose, stretched my back. "You coming back with me? My chopper's coming in now." Across the horizon I could see the small speck of the Huey returning to pick me up.

"I'll catch the last supply bird

out of here," he said. "I might as well make that map while I'm here. But you know, Mr. Hatchett, there is another thing Mitch said just after he came out of the An Khe shop the last time that I couldn't figure."

Peterson was using his hand to shield the glare of sunlight as he looked up at me.

"He got in the jeep and said, 'Phonies. They're phonies.'"

"Who was he referring to? Trai and his people or someone in the MP platoon?" Phonies, plural. Immediately I thought of Mitch's cryptic call to me: "I've got them cold." Them, plural.

Peterson was shaking his head. "I have no idea. None at all."

About then my ride landed. Anxious to get off the firebase, I knew, if I needed, I could get together with Peterson later when he got back to brigade base camp.

The door gunner extended his arm to help me scramble into the Huey. The metal floor of the chopper, where I sat crosslegged, vibrated beneath me as the bird lifted and then banked into the direction of L.Z. Victoria.

When I get back to Victoria, I thought, it might not be a bad time to have my underwear laundered.

On the chopper ride back to L.Z. Victoria I was able to rethink some of what I'd learned that morning before flying out to see Peterson and add that to what Peterson had just told me.

First thing that morning I'd pored over the list of hometowns Lieutenant Williams provided me.

My hope was I'd spot someone from the southern tier New York/northern Pennsylvania area. That was the hub of the area Mitch and I had planned our company would cover: as far west as Erie; north to Buffalo; east to Syracuse; and south to Bradford. We'd hoped to give Pinkerton a run for its money. Mitch argued eagerly that we should expand this territory in all directions, like add another hundred miles all around where we could, east, west, and south.

Williams' list was thorough. Colson was from Colorado; Williams, as he'd said, was from Mentor, Ohio, east of Cleveland; Vinh was from Saigon; birthday boy Pitman from Utah; one MP hailed from Florida; three from California, one from Maine, one from Weiser, Idaho, and on and on across the states.

Only one hometown sparked my interest. Mullens'.

Pfc Mullens, the snake handler, was from Buffalo, a short hour's drive north of where Mitch lived and within our business territory.

The space inside the tent in Mitch's hooch began to collect heat from the morning sun bearing down on the canvas.

Lieutenant Williams had come in just as I was pocketing the list. No doubt about it, Williams looked a lot more refreshed and in better spirits than he had done the day before.

"We found the other bamboo viper," he said, grinning a toothy grin. "I ought to put Mullens in for a medal for this. He said we might find it sunning itself, the way snakes like to do early in the morning. And sure enough, there it was, warming itself across the wooden step to the latrine." Williams stopped, breathed happily, and said, "It was a big sucker, too." He spread his hands to indicate that the second adult viper was a bit longer than two feet. "We killed it, Vinh chopped its head off and buried it. That's that. Hot damn. We'll all sleep better now."

I grunted. Flashes of my nightmare returned. It wasn't the real life vipers that had kept me awake all night. It was

a worse kind of snake, the kind of snake I couldn't kill.

"You having any luck?" Williams asked me.

I shook my head.

"Well, I got you a bird out to the L.Z. Peterson's on if you want it," Williams told me. "The pilot said for you to meet him at the med-evac pad at twelve hundred hours. He'll fly you out, wait around a bit, and bring you back. Peterson, too, if he's ready to come back. I'll have Colson arrange for a patrol to take you down to the pad. I've got a staff meeting to attend."

Just then Colson stuck his head into the hooch. "BTOC called, sir," he reported. "Your meeting has been pushed ahead: Ten hundred hours instead of eleven. They sound excited."

Williams glanced at his watch and nodded. He turned to me, wearing a more serious expression. "That reminds me, Mr. Hatchett. How about, if you get a moment, you take time to go down in our bunker to familiarize yourself with it. Military intelligence, if there is such a thing, has been saying they're expecting a major VC offensive soon. Sappers. And if they're right and if we get infiltrated, I want you to head straight for that bunker. Everyone else will already have positions to take

up. So if you would, stop in and take a look-see. It'll save you fumbling around in the dark at a time when things could be hot and heavy around here."

Hearing that jolted me awake faster than a cup of army coffee.

A few minutes later, I descended the wooden steps built between the heavy timbers supporting the weight of the platoon's underground bunker. Inside, I was surprised by what I saw.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. When they did, I realized the bunker had been fixed up to resemble a small cafe. Tables and chairs were situated throughout. A long, tattered couch sat against one wall. The bunker walls had been paneled with slats torn from ammo crates, the wood sanded and stained a light maple color. *Playboy* pinups adorned most of the wall space. A single, shaded overhead light burned towards the back of the bunker, while the front part was taken up by a long bar behind which stood Pfc Mullens.

"Ah, Mr. Hatchett," Mullens grinned, "my first customer of the day. Beer?"

Although it was late morning, a beer sounded good. Behind Mullens a sign, hand-carved in wood, read THE SNAKE PIT.

Mullens noticed me reading the sign. "One of the guys did that. Pretty good job, wouldn't you say? Someone came up with that name. It's named after me, of course." He slid my beer across the bar towards me.

I took a sip. "Why's that?"

"Because I did most of the interior work down here. I did a lot of carpentry work back in the World. When I got here, these walls were dirt walls, and when I realized we could use ammo crates for paneling and could get stain, I thought, hell, why not? It gave me something to do and gave the guys someplace comfortable to go. And since they call me Snake, well, it just seemed to fit. Nice and cool down here, isn't it?" He added, "Just like a snake pit."

It was about twenty degrees cooler in the bunker, since the sheets of heavy metal and layers of sandbags on the ground-level roof for fortification acted also as insulation. "Are you the permanent bartender?" I asked Mullens.

"No, hell no. We all take turns, like any other duty. I *am* kind of the manager. I pick up all the supplies, get everyone's beer ration cards and buy the beer at the PX on the MAC-V compound in Phu Bien. Yours is on the house, Mr. Hatchett."

I nodded my thanks, took another sip, turned and scanned

the room, checking the layout of the furniture. "I'm supposed to come here if we get hit," I told Mullens.

"Down here?" When he laughed, it came out as a snort. "Does someone hate you or what? You wouldn't catch *me* down here. Into bunkers is where sappers like to toss their satchel charges. I'd prefer to be out in the open spaces, thank you. Better bring earplugs. They tell me the concussion from those satchel charges is so powerful it pops the blood right out your eyes."

"Thanks," I told him. "That's just what I needed to hear."

Mullens cleaned behind the bar while I sipped the cold beer. "You heard we found the other snake," he said. "I kind of figured there was at least one more full-grown one around."

Leaning on the bar, I studied Mullens' youthful, well-built, freckled features. "I heard," I said and swallowed some beer.

"They're nocturnal, you know."

"Bamboo vipers are?"

"Yeah. It's too hot during the day for them to be out. Imagine how the green of that viper blends in with bamboo. Pretty hard to spot one in a thick stand of green bamboo, especially at night. You could be looking one right in the eye and

never know it until it's too late. Isn't nature wonderful?"

"Beautiful, Mullens, just beautiful. Why are they around here in the platoon area?"

Mullens thought for a moment. "I'd say that when the engineers cleared the jungle around the area, they disturbed the snakes. They had to go somewhere. There's food here. Rats."

"It's occurred to me, if you're from Buffalo, how would you get to handle water moccasins? Aren't they normally down south?"

He raised his head. "Who said I was from Buffalo?"

That caught me unprepared, and I pretended to be trying to remember. "I don't know. Someone mentioned it, I guess."

"Huh. Wonder who'd tell you that? My parents live in Buffalo. So does my brother. But I didn't think anyone knew that." He busied himself behind the bar again, speaking while he worked. "Actually, Mr. Hatchett, the last few years, before I joined the army, I'd been living just north of New Orleans with my uncle. I was going to school there, taking up wildlife conservation. I ran out of money, and before I could get more and get back into school, Uncle Sam said he thought I might be interested in the wild

life the army has to offer. Some wild life, huh? The way I see it, the army owes me now. Big time."

"The night of the party," I asked Mullens, "were you tending bar down here?"

"Most of the time, yeah. What a blowout."

"You notice any argument Mitch may have gotten into with someone? Or anyone leaving sometime between one and two and then maybe coming back? Anything unusual happening?"

Mullens kept shaking his head no. "Mitch sat right there most of the night." He pointed at the end bar stool. "Kept to himself, like he usually did. As for anyone leaving, people were coming and going all night. The piss tube is right outside. You know what they say, you don't own it, you just rent it."

"How about Colson? He was working CQ after midnight. Did he make an appearance any time? Or Vinh?" I dug in my wallet for some MPC's to tip Mullens and to leave enough money to buy a round for the rest of the platoon as my going-away present.

"You mean *Sergeant* Colson?" Mullens laughed. "No, I can tell you that jerk wasn't around. Vinh was here most of the night."

In the dim light I was having

difficulty seeing the denominations on the Military Payment Certificates GI's used as money in Vietnam. The GI's called it play money or Monopoly money. American greenbacks were prohibited, and any transaction between GI's and Vietnamese was supposed to be done in Vietnamese piasters, not in MPC's, but that rule was commonly ignored. So, because the MPC's represented good hard American cash and not wanting it to get in the wrong hands, the military at different times (and always unannounced) had a policy of suddenly changing all the MPC's. Posts all across Vietnam were sealed off, and all old MPC's were collected and exchanged for new MPC's, the new denominations all colored differently. The result? Hordes of Vietnamese civilians, many in the blackmarket business, many whorehouse owners, shop owners, drug dealers, got caught with bushel baskets full of old MPC's, worthless money.

Because the last MPC exchange had recently occurred, in the dim light I couldn't tell a ten from a one dollar note. I continued digging through my wallet, tilting it towards better light. "I want to leave something for the bar," I told Mullens.

"Take your time, Mr. Hatchett," Mullens said humorously when he realized I was having trouble. "That's a good-sized one there." He pointed at a twenty spot MPC.

I slid the twenty across the bar, smiling at my own difficulties and at Mullens' humor. "Take a tip for yourself and buy the guys a drink on me."

He fiddled with the bill, folding it and unfolding it. "You really think someone did Mitch in with that snake?"

I snapped my head up, surprised. "Who told you that?"

Mullens folded the bill into a tight triangle, like you'd fold the American flag, and smiled weakly. "Probably the same person who told you I lived in Buffalo. You can't keep any secrets around this outfit, Mr. Hatchett. The whole platoon knows."

I was more than a little irritated that my suspicions had become common talk. If Lieutenant Williams hadn't already been heading for the staff meeting, he and I would have been having our own meeting. Instead I headed for the chopper pad to catch my ride out to see Peterson.

Just as I was leaving the bunker, I turned to say something to Mullens and caught him taking that twenty spot I'd left to buy drinks for the rest

of the guys and stuffing the bill into his fatigue pants pocket.

Although I was talking with Vinh, my attention was riveted on the beehive of activity going on around me in the platoon area.

Returning from seeing Peterson, I had found Vinh coming out of his hooch. "Vinh, I need to ask you something." (Three MP's were mounting an M-60 machine gun atop the bunker.)

"Sure, Mr. Hashett. Is this about Mitch's murder?"

Christ, did everybody know? "Yes, this is about Mitch," I told him, irked. (Williams was directing the parking of the platoon's gun jeep so its machine gun faced out toward the perimeter wire, a short fifty yards from my hooch.) "Could you tell me, Vinh, why Mitch didn't use you last week when he went to Phu Bien to talk with a Vietnamese there?" I had to raise my voice over the din of activity around me. "He used a Montagnard. Do you know who this Montagnard interpreter was? Where I can find him now?"

Vinh frowned (the way I frowned when I heard Williams tell an MP, "Make sure those claymores are facing the right direction. It says right on them, 'This Side Toward Enemy.'")

and said, "Mitch don't tell me why he don't use me." Vinh hesitated, translating his Vietnamese thoughts into English words. "Sometimes Mitch, he say to me, Vinh, you don't tell hard enough the Vietnamese what I want to know. Mitch say to me I don't carry big stick." Vinh shrugged. "I afraid sometimes Mitch get mad at me, Mr. Hashett, and make me go somewhere else. I like it here. All MP's my friend. You my friend, Mr. Hashett. Mitch my friend. Mullens number one friend."

"And that's why Mitch didn't use you? Because you can't be forceful?" Had Vinh come up with any other reason than that, I might have gone on suspecting Mitch wanted to keep as much of his investigation out of the platoon as he could. I might have suspected Mitch suspected Vinh was involved. But I knew there was no love lost between the nomadic Montagnards of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. Because of that inherent animosity and because they spoke not only English and the Montagnard tongue, but also Vietnamese and sometimes French, the Montagnards were highly regarded as interpreters. If I wanted to drive a point home hard to a Vietnamese, like Trai, I'd probably use a Montagnard, too. I

could see Mitch disgusted at Vinh, too, for not being forceful, but I doubted Mitch could have had Vinh transferred to another unit. Although Vinh might not know that.

So while I didn't totally dismiss Vinh's possible involvement (any more than I could ignore the clatter of heavy ammo crates filled with thousands of machine gun rounds being dragged out by the MP's and set up near each machine gun), for the time being his answer satisfied me. He said he didn't know where Mitch had gotten the Montagnard, which infantry unit he was borrowed from. He said again, "Mullens number one friend. Mullens number one MP."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

Vinh pushed off from the sandbag wall he was leaning against. "Mullens tell me to tell everyone that." He waved across the platoon area at Mullens, who was restringing strands of barbed wire around the MP's POW holding center. It looked to me, as I watched Vinh approach Mullens and they slapped each other's palms in friendship, that Mullens was enlarging the POW area.

I ventured over towards Williams, hoping to commandeer a jeep to take into Phu Bien to

check out Trai's An Khe Laundry Shop. If need be, I'd follow Mitch's lead and get my own Montagnard interpreter. But Lieutenant Williams was able to convince me that getting a jeep was not only impossible but unwise.

"No, you can't use a jeep, Mr. Hatchett. Sorry. I've got all my patrols out now in Phu Bien trying to get everyone back on post. MI said at the meeting there's definitely a battalion of NVA sappers in the area and someone, us or Phu Bien, is going to get hit. Tonight. Overrun. Big time."

Most convincing. Something sour rumbled through my guts.

Williams placed his hand on his .45 holstered on his hip. "And I hope you took time to check out the bunker, like I told you. If not, do so now. If we get hit, I can't be responsible for you running around the area at night where someone might mistake you for a sapper."

Suddenly I didn't feel safe wherever I ended up: in the bunker I was trapped, a target for explosive satchel charges; outside the bunker, I could be cut down by MP's with nervous trigger fingers.

I spun away from Williams, and with long, anxious strides, I headed for Mitch's hooch. The only weapon I was carrying was a .38 holstered in the small

of my back, and I was thinking I might want something with a little more firepower to it, something like Mitch's M-16. I hoped he had ammunition—lots and lots of ammo.

"Oh, Mr. Hatchett," Colson called to me as I passed his cubicle on my way to Mitch's hooch.

I stuck my head into his sleeping quarters.

"Did anyone tell you base camp called? They've cleared you to accompany Mitch's body home, since you're so short anyway. They're cutting your orders now. They want you back at base camp by the day after tomorrow. You're almost home, Mr. Hatchett. And I'm not far behind you."

I stepped inside Colson's cubicle. The sergeant sat on his cot in his OD skivvies cleaning his M-16, rifle parts strewn all over the cot. Five OD bandoliers heavy with M-16 magazines lay draped across the cot, too. I took a seat in an empty folding chair, picked up a pack of Colson's cigarettes and his lighter, and smoked the first cigarette I'd smoked in years.

On Colson's footlocker was a large cardboard box containing artifacts from Vietnam: six-inch high ceramic statues of various animals; some clothing; some wooden, hand-carved

figures; small pieces of jewelry, too. I picked up a statue of a tiger and turned the lightweight piece in my hands.

"I send all that stuff home to my sister," Colson explained. "She sells them in her shop." He pulled out a cigarette for himself.

"In Colorado?" I asked.

"No, no. Outside Albany. She went to school there, bought the shop, and got into the printing business. Does a real nice job: color brochures, posters, anti-war material mostly. Pretty elaborate setup really. But she makes a fortune off this stuff I send her. I don't know why. It's just cheap junk."

I set the statue back in the box alongside a ceramic monkey, a water buffalo, animals native to Vietnam.

"So what are you going to do when you're discharged, Mr. Hatchett?"

I settled comfortably into the chair. "I don't know now. Mitch and I had plans." I watched the cigarette smoke dissipate into nothing. "Maybe I'll try to find my ex-wife. We kind of let the military and this war come between us." I wasn't sure that was the only reason Nicole and I had divorced. The times had something to do with it, too, especially the budding women's movement. I figured she woke

up one day suddenly realizing she needed to be her own person, and her plans to accomplish that didn't include me. New person, new life, new view of things. In with the new, out with the old. Breathe deeply. Live. But I still couldn't help feeling resentful, a bit bitter about it.

"I can tell you this, this war ain't right," Colson said. "Some of these guys aren't going to be right, either. I think I'm beginning to believe all that anti-war stuff my sister puts out. Would you believe, she's even involved in an underground system, like an underground railroad, that steals guys away into Canada. Imagine that."

"It's not a popular war back home," I conceded.

"All I know is, I'm out of here in a few weeks, maybe sooner, if I get an early out. All I have to do is get through things like tonight. You heard we may get hit."

I nodded and crushed the cigarette out. "I'm on my way now to get Mitch's 16."

"Good," Colson grinned. "If you're armed, you won't be looking for a hiding spot. I don't want you finding mine." He began reassembling his rifle. "So you want me to call base camp and arrange for the convoy to pick you up tomorrow?"

I stood to leave. Ordinarily I—anyone—would be thrilled to know he'd just gotten an early out, a week shaved off his time in-country. Ordinarily I'd have Colson right on the phone making my convoy arrangements and I couldn't pack fast enough.

But thoughts of just packing up and leaving the truth about Mitch's death unsolved bored a hole right through me. When someone murders a friend, that's a lot different from a GI's being killed in a battle, although I wasn't quite sure what that difference was. There certainly didn't seem to be much difference between Mitch and the other GI's I viewed lying on the table at Grave Registration. No, sir. They all looked equal to me. All men created equal? All men equal at the moment of death. I knew I should do something, but only had two days to do it now.

I wanted to be able to give Mitch's wife the truth about her husband's death. If he was accidentally bitten, I wanted to be able to tell her that. If it wasn't accidental, I wanted to be able to put a name to it. Who? And why? That to me was more important suddenly than going home.

Two days. Time was my enemy now. (Time and those NVA sappers.)

But I seemed no closer to the truth than when I first arrived.

"Wait on that," I told Colson. "I still have some things I need to check out."

Colson lifted his head and studied me curiously, then went back to assembling his weapon. "Well, good luck to you tonight, then," he said tonelessly, like he was speaking to the rifle. "Keep your head down, keep your wits about you, and keep firing."

The war did not visit us that night.

Instead the sappers tried overrunning the MAC-V compound in Phu Bien, were repelled after a six hour shootout, and so by the time Williams and I were in the jeep the next day heading for Phu Bien, ARVN and American forces were busy sweeping the town for NVA stragglers, who could hide within the city among sympathetic countrymen as easily as a bamboo viper might slither back into a stand until the time came to strike again. The NVA and VC were very adept at blending in. And why not? It was their country.

I decided not to confront Williams about his breach of confidence. Nor did I tell him about the shadowy figure of a man (a man too tall to be an NVA sap-

per) I'd caught standing in the doorway of my hooch late the night before, just about to enter my quarters. I jumped up, startled. (I was sleeping lightly for fear of sappers and for fear of worse nightmares, so any slight noise sat me up.) But before I could slip my boots on, or even reach for my pistol under my pillow, the shadow spun around and disappeared back out into the night, out among the tents, the sandbag walls, and the MP's standing guard around the compound.

Instead, I asked Williams, "What's the rift between Colson and Mullens?" Something had begun to nag me. I sensed there might have been something I was overlooking; something obvious; something I could be looking right in the eye and never know it, as Mullens so nicely put it; something as obvious as the strained relations between Colson and Mullens. *Phonies. They're phonies... I've got them cold.* For most of the morning I'd been beating the mental brush looking for that something obvious, starting with when I arrived at L.Z. Victoria. And I was continuing the search even as I listened to Williams explain.

"That?" He pushed his hat back as he drove the jeep. "That's a rank bumping into a personality. Colson's a good

noncom. He knows what has to be done and goes about doing it. But he doesn't have a very good touch with the guys, so he ends up doing a lot of the work himself, work he could be assigning someone else. A lot of guys buck him. Mullens bucks him every time he can. Maybe that's why they call E-5's buck sergeants. But Mullens is a worker, too. He's done wonders in the bunker, building it all up and all. So Colson does things he could have others doing, and Mullens just goes ahead and does what he wants, regardless of what Colson thinks. I like it. More things get done. But it almost got down to fists awhile back."

We passed the main square in Phu Bien where a couple of dozen NVA sappers, killed the night before, lay in a row. It was easy to see swarms of flies crawling over the yellowish gray skin. I turned my head from the bloating, blood-encrusted bodies displayed there in the heat as a warning to any local NVA or VC sympathizers. I knew that could very well be half the population of Phu Bien.

I was glad for the diversion when Williams said, "You know, though, you asked me about anything that might be going on in our platoon, and I

just remembered Mitch was onto something with Mullens."

"Mullens?"

"Mullens. It's not a big thing, and I'm not even sure it was happening, but weekly we get SP cartons, Sundry Packs, full of free cigarettes, hygiene stuff, candy. Every forward unit gets them. But we can't possibly use all of it, so instead of throwing it away, we decided we'd donate what we didn't use to an orphanage here in Phu Bien. Mullens was supposed to be taking the stuff to them when he picked up bar supplies."

"And he wasn't?"

"No. Apparently not." Williams steered around an army truck. "I stopped in at the orphanage with Vinh one day to see how the stuff was being received and did they need anything else, and lo and behold, through Vinh translating, the nuns told me they'd gotten nothing from us. So I had Mitch look into it."

"What did he do?"

"He pulled some of the items out and marked them, initialed them, I believe. He wanted to go around to different shops in Phu Bien to see where Mullens might be selling. Then he planned to confront Mullens. But it's such a paltry sum. I mean you're talking about twenty-five, fifty dollars at most. Is that enough to murder

someone over, if what you believe happened happened?"

"It might be if he's discovered how easy it is to sell things on the blackmarket and has moved to bigger items," I said, more to myself than to Williams.

We wove through the narrow streets of Phu Bien, shaded streets lined with open shops and crowded with American military vehicles jamming the intersections. Vietnamese riding bicycles and small motor scooters darted in and out among the heavier traffic. We pulled in front of the An Khe shop and stopped.

Williams checked the jeep for anything loose that might get stolen while we were inside, then grabbed an armful of laundry and said, "This is a great place to get *everything* cleaned." He stressed "everything" and smiled out the side of his mouth as if to make me privy to a well kept secret.

Inside the shop, long tables were set up on which a variety of items were marked for sale. Out a back door to an open area I spotted a few older Vietnamese mama-sans crouched near a small fire where irons were being heated in the coals for ironing laundry. Williams set his laundry on a counter, and after a young Vietnamese girl sorted through it and marked

it, she smiled at Williams, nodded slightly, acknowledging his unspoken request, grabbed his large hand in her small one, and led him through a door to a small room behind the counter, closing the door behind them.

Suddenly I felt someone grab my crotch.

"You want me to show you good time, GI?" a young, nice looking teenage girl said to me. "You very handsome, GI. I love you very much." She continued to rub me.

I grabbed her hand and held it lightly. "And you are very beautiful," I told her, not lying. "I take you go with me to America." I felt her trying to force her hand back to me, trying to drum up business. Then her face clouded over as she noticed the U.S. on my collar where my rank would normally have been.

"You MP?" She glanced at the door Williams had passed through.

I brushed past her to one of the long tables. On it was an array of small items, U.S. made. Single cans of beer, cigarettes, lighters, small tins of C-rations. Some of the merchandise was items stolen out of jeeps left unguarded in the streets of Phu Bien. I knew if there was bigger military stuff, it would be stored out back somewhere, out of sight. Drugs,

too. I picked up a bar of American soap and turned it over in my hands.

The girl stepped back and made a sound like she'd just had the wind knocked out of her. "Ahhhhhhh. You C.I.D." She spun around and rattled off something in Vietnamese to the older women doing the ironing. All eyes were suddenly glued on me. "You C.I.D., like Mitch. Come, C.I.D. I show you good time. I souvenir you." She tugged at my arm.

Near the small company logo on the soap wrapping I spotted it. A small *M* inked in. Mitch's mark. Mullens *was* in business for himself. Here. With Trai.

I asked the girl. "Is Trai here?"

"Trai?" She rattled off more quick phrases of Vietnamese to the older women. One of them made a sharp, curt reply. The girl said to me, "Trai not here. He go *di di* somewhere else."

"When will he be back?"

She shrugged her small shoulders. "Maybe tomorrow. Come, C.I.D. We go make love now, then you take me go with you to America. I love you very much. You come back tomorrow see Trai." She tugged at my elbow trying to stand between me and the table.

At the end of the table I also spotted Vietnamese-made products: some clothing, jewelry,

and ceramic statues like I'd seen in Colson's room. Next to a statue of a monkey I spied a figurine of a brightly colored snake curled with most of its head and body raised as if ready to strike. I hadn't noticed a statue of a snake in Colson's hooch. The snake's two ruby-red eyes seemed to be watching me, moving with me, as I walked along inspecting the merchandise.

The girl tugged me again, pulling harder on my arm.

More Vietnamese was spoken among the laundry women, who were just as intent on watching what I was doing as the ceramic snake seemed to be.

I moved towards a closed door near the women. Behind it I was sure the big ticket items were stored: grenades, large tins of food, cases of food, ammunition, items stolen or bought outright. Pot or opium, too.

Vietnamese was spoken louder, faster, more frantically as I neared the door, hoping to make it obvious I was intent on opening it. I had no right to go through the closed door. To do that I'd need to have a Vietnamese national policeman with me, but I wanted to see to what extent they'd go to stop me.

Vietnamese was spoken almost nonstop now, louder, calling out loudly to someone. The young whore hung on me like the dead weight of an anchor, jabbering about "good time, loving me."

Just as I touched the handle, Lieutenant Williams came out from the room with the other whore. He was hitching up his pants, but his beady eyes bore down on me across the shop. "You ready to go?" he asked, zipping up. Thick beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. He turned and rubbed the young girl's small breast and kissed her lightly on her cheek. And it didn't escape me that when he tipped her, he paid her in MPC's, not in Vietnamese piasters as he should have.

I'd only wanted to see what the women would do if I neared the door. But in doing that I had to wonder if I hadn't flushed Williams out, too. Had the girl he was with heard the women out front jabbering away, and had she warned Williams? Or was it just coincidence he'd finished his business at that moment?

I left the An Khe shop thinking that not only would I need a Montagnard interpreter when I returned to the shop to speak with Trai, but maybe I'd bring a couple of "white mice," national policemen, with me, too.

It might be inventory time at An Khe.

Williams didn't speak the entire ride back to L.Z. Victoria.

I stood and paced. I sat. I stood again. I stretched out on Mitch's cot. All the while, against the quiet of the night, I reviewed everything about Mitch's death I had, starting with his phone call; my arrival; the note with my name on it; the people in the MP area; Trai and the An Khe shop.

I still couldn't shake the feeling I was overlooking something vital. But as I searched for it, I realized I had absolutely nothing concrete to go on. Instead, my head was filled with intangibles—suspicions and illusions, like my nightmare, darting in and out of a maze of green shadows.

I wasn't even sure Mitch's death wasn't an accident.

I shifted my attention to something else, hoping to free myself from the discouraging entanglement of my thoughts, hoping it would be like getting stuck on a crossword puzzle word. If I put the puzzle down, thought about something else, and returned to it later, often the word that had me stumped was suddenly right there.

First, I listened to the nighttime silence. The silence was

such, it was hard to imagine a war was going on. Almost everyone else was in bed, and it was well after midnight. Even the artillery was quiet, I noticed, hauntingly quiet.

I thought of Nicole and how she might greet me when I finally caught up with her. What could I say to her? I entertained no thoughts or hopes of patching up our marriage. I did want to patch up our friendship, though, open doors.

I thought of going home; in a matter of days I'd be there, discharged. What would I do next? The army had been my life the last four years, and I sensed a large void in front of me I'd need to fill.

More thoughts of Nicole; a bit of bitter resentment.

Ho Chi Minh is a nationalist, Carl. Easily I remembered one of our last arguments right before she said she'd had it with military life, the government, the Establishment. She'd reached the end of something, she said, but she wasn't sure what that something was. She just sensed that something in and around her was dying. We, above all people, should understand his need to unite his country. He came to us for help. We turned him down. Now we're fighting him. It's a senseless war, Carl. Unjustified.

If I wrote her a letter, said I'd like to see her one more time, then I wouldn't walk in on her by surprise. Yes, a letter would be good. A letter was the right thing to do. Then she'd be expecting me and wouldn't be surprised and on the defensive. We could talk of womanhood and war . . .

. . . expecting me . . .

. . . expecting me.

I bolted out of bed, alert, and with adrenaline pumping through me the way a quick realization fills a guy full of juice sometimes.

Expecting me.

There. What was that moving I hadn't seen before?

Reflexively, as I stood, I reached behind my back and touched my pistol. In that hazy maze of my mind I saw the head of a snake emerge—a snake's head with beady, snaky eyes staring me right in the eye. And in my mind the face of that snake was the face of Lieutenant Williams.

I ducked out of the cubicle heading for Williams' hooch. The good lieutenant had a bit of explaining to do. As I neared his quarters, with every step I took, more of what I was thinking began to unravel—uncoil was more apt—for instance, Cleveland was near our proposed business territory. But first things first.

A light burned inside Williams' tent. When I charged through the flaps, he spun around from his desk and in one sweeping movement reached for his fully loaded M-16 leaning in a corner near him. He stopped in mid-motion when he saw it was me.

"That's a good way to get shot," he said flatly, "charging in like that. Folks are still jumpy about sappers, you know."

He drew in a breath to relax, turned back to his desk, and sealed an envelope before handing it to me.

"Since you're here, give this to Mitch's wife, would you." His voice deadened. "Nastiest job in the army, these letters."

I jammed the letter into my pocket.

"Now, what brings you out this late?" He sat back and crossed his legs, clasping his hands behind his head and angling himself so he could see me without really having to look at me.

"There's something I need to know." I watched him closely, waiting for the slightest flicker of surprise or deceit.

He studied me out of the corner of his eye. "Shoot."

Wasting no time, I said, "It dawned on me that when I first got here a few days ago, you were sitting in the PMO like

you were waiting for me, as if you *expected* me to be in that convoy. The viper that bit Mitch wasn't buried right away because, as someone said, they thought I might want to see it. Also when I got here, Colson told me that you told him to put me up in Mitch's hooch. What I want to know, lieutenant, is how you or anyone else knew I was coming up here. How'd you know I was in the convoy? You didn't tell Colson to put me in Mitch's hooch while I was with you, so you must have told him before I arrived. That wouldn't have been you I heard come into the PMO while Mitch and I were talking on the phone, would it, lieutenant?"

He rubbed his hands down over his face and twisted in the chair, leaning over—towards his rifle, or so I feared—then sat back. "I don't know what you mean about you and Mitch talking, but let me think a moment."

I gave him a moment and stood there with my hands folded around the small of my back. With a flip of my thumb I unsnapped the holster strap, not knowing what he might do. His M-16 was within easy reach. "Take your time," I told him.

"Let's see." His head swiveled on his shoulders, his body squirmed, like he was uncom-

fortable, like a snake with its head pinned down. But finally he said, "Colson told me."

"Colson told you I was in the convoy, on my way up here?"

Williams spun around in the chair to face me, folding his fingers together. "Yes," he said. "When we found Mitch dead, and with Peterson having to go out to that S.I.R., I told Colson to call you. But he said you were on your way up. I assumed he'd taken it upon himself to call you. That's the way he is. I assumed he'd already talked with you, and that's when I told him to let you use Mitch's hooch when you got here."

What had only been the head of a snake emerging from my thoughts moments before was now the full body of one I could see uncoiling as this unraveled. Colson couldn't have called base camp. Base camp would have contacted me over the convoy radio. They would not have let me walk into this situation blind.

Back in my hooch, I unfolded Mitch's map of New York State. The hollow ceramic viper I *didn't* see in Colson's hooch was sparking my curiosity. Hollow statues. Hollow enough to cram something up inside before mailing them to his sister.

I've got them cold.

Recoil any viper? Break one open? Break any ceramic viper open and I'll find... find... what? What was Mitch referring to?

Outside Albany, Colson had said. I scanned the map around Albany, New York, looking for a mark Mitch might have made. Albany was at the outer eastern fringes of our projected business territory, if we expanded as Mitch had argued. *We can make this our first case back in the World...* Ah, but so many little towns around Albany: Easton, Grafton, Coltonie, Berlin...

I could check in Colson's hooch for an address on the box.

I flipped the map over to the index and heard myself gasp when I saw it. There, in dark blue ink, Mitch had circled a town. I was disappointed in myself that I hadn't turned the map over before. What Mitch had circled was *Coila O-27*.

Sure enough, using those O-27 coordinates, the other side of the map showed Coila, New York, a few miles north and slightly east of Albany.

It hit me with the impact of a sledge.

Mitch's note didn't say RE-COIL ANY VIPER or anything like that. It said, RE COILA NY VIPER: Re: Coila, New York. Viper. Colson and his sis-

ter and drugs were looking like a good bet.

What bothered me was, the statues seemed awfully small to ship home any quantity of drugs, enough to justify murder anyway.

I was down the hall to Colson's hooch in quick strides.

A bit of pale moonlight was all the illumination I needed to rifle through the cardboard box still on Colson's footlocker.

I checked the mailing address on the box: Sarah Colson, Notes & Notions, Coila, New York, and a zip. But I couldn't find any ceramic statues of a snake among the items in the box.

Colson was in the PMO manning the desk, so I had time to make a wider search of his hooch. What I didn't have time for was proper military procedure. On my hands and knees, reaching under Colson's cot, I pushed books, empty boxes, boots, dust puppies, and a duffel bag out of the way. Way in the back, behind the duffel bag, I felt it. Even as I pulled it out from under the cot, I could tell by the feel it was one of those ceramic statues of a snake. I had it right by the head.

My first thought was I'd acted too hastily. The light statue felt empty, too light to be filled with contraband of any bulk. I was torn between break-

ing it open or just putting it back when I suddenly realized I was no longer alone in the hooch. The shadow of a man holding a pistol had slipped in behind me.

"You want to sweep under there for me, Mr. Hatchett, while you're at it?" he hissed, snakelike.

Even as I stood, allowing my eyes to adjust to the dimness, I could see the pistol. A wave of horror swept through me.

The pistol was twisting, no, slithering, in Colson's hand.

“You should have just gone home, Mr. Hatchett. You and Mitch should have left well enough alone,” Colson hissed again. “And don't think anyone's going to hear you. Everyone in this tent is on duty right now. I make out the duty roster. So it's just you, me, and our buddy here.”

I tried not to look at “our” buddy but found myself mesmerized by the twisting, coiling thing. I wanted to speak, but felt something sour and foul-tasting coming up my throat, gagging me momentarily. With the moonlight whitening the skin of my arms the color of bone, I feared my nightmare and real life were about to become one and the same.

"I'll take that." Colson indicated the snake statue I was still holding. He held the live bamboo viper up higher, closer to my face. Its body was wrapped full length around Colson's forearm while Colson held it by the back of the neck. Near its fangs I could even see the white sacs heavy with poison inside its open mouth. "In fact, I'll trade you. Yours for mine." He leered in a way that told me he would not hesitate to throw that live snake in my face.

When I finally managed to speak, I was able to turn ever so slightly at the waist, enough that, given a couple of moments, I could slowly inch my hand unseen around towards my back. My holster strap was still undone; my fatigue shirt was up over the pistol handle. My next problem would be—which snake do I shoot first, when, and if, I got the chance. But the answer to that came quickly enough. I knew I was more than two steps away from medical attention. A lot more.

"So what do you have going, Colson?" My thumb brushed past my first belt loop. "Got a little drug business going with Trai, do you?"

For a moment Colson's shadowy face seemed amused. "Drugs? You're way off base,

Mr. Hatchett. That's so ordinary."

Suddenly I was as perplexed as I was anxious. The statue seemed empty. What could Colson have in it that would warrant this; warrant killing Mitch? My thumb and fingers were wrapping around the pistol handle slowly, ever so slowly.

"Mr. Hatchett must have been in my hooch looking for a cigarette, sir. He bummed a couple off me the other day." Colson spoke in an eerie, detached voice, not speaking to me. "Looks like there must have been another viper in my hooch, sir," like he was speaking to some great spirit in and around the tent somewhere. But then his voice suddenly became earthy and threatening, directed at me again. "That's what I'll tell the lieutenant, Mr. Hatchett."

All expression drained from his face except for grim determination. He hissed one last time, "The hell with it. I don't need to talk with you—" And he moved his arm in a pitching gesture, like you throw a softball or a horseshoe underhanded.

From out in the hall, entering the tent, and causing Colson to hesitate for just a split second, came Lieutenant Williams' voice calling out loudly.

"Mr. Hatchett, I just realized that—"

The split second Colson hesitated was all I needed. In that instant I grasped my pistol.

Simultaneously I tossed the ceramic statue at Colson, while he flipped the live bamboo viper toward my face. The two snakes collided in mid-air with enough force to knock them both off course, the live snake hitting the floor between us with a heavy sickening thud, and then slithering and essing along the slippery wooden floorboards.

It coiled automatically at our feet into a position it could strike from quickly.

My pistol was out and up, and as I swept the barrel past Colson, while back-pedaling, I fired, fired quickly (too quickly I'd think later, but panic has a way of taking over a person's best intentions), one, two, three times across Colson's chest, slamming him against the wood cubicle.

The live viper struck out once, twice, nailing Colson on the calf with quick, jabbing strikes as he fell to the floor. Instinctively the snake turned toward me next, but my pistol was still moving and I was already bringing it down, not bothering aiming, firing as I moved, emptying the rest of my

shells into the viper, splitting it nearly in half in two places.

A wretched bitterness rose from my guts and up my throat, like a volcano needing to spew hot lava. I gagged and heaved and then holding my stomach, I spun around quickly and erupted, emptying every nasty, foul-tasting thing I had in me into the cardboard box and onto the array of Colson's souvenirs.

Seventeen thousand seven hundred and sixty dollars. Mentally I erased the zero on the dollar amount of U.S. greenbacks spread out before Williams and me in the PMO. Seventeen -seventy-six, I thought, that's the spirit, Colson.

The note Colson had scribbled to his sister and stuffed into the ceramic snake along with the greenbacks told us most of what we needed to know. The rest I could fill in. *Phonies*, I thought. Counterfeit MPC's.

The note said: *Sarah. Good job. You missed your calling. You should have been an engraver. They were good, good enough for over here anyway. I passed them off onto the laundry guy. Enclosed is your payment.*

Lieutenant Williams and I sealed and initialed the enve-

lope containing the money for me to take back to base camp.

"I'll have my replacement back there get on this, and he can work with Peterson in wrapping it up," I told Williams. My flak jacket and steel pot lay across a chair. All I needed was a ride out to the front gate where I'd catch a southbound convoy back to Pleiku. Then I was heading home.

"What shall I instruct Peterson to do?" Williams asked. "I'm not sure how this worked. Colson stuck Trai with some phony MPC's?"

I nodded. "My guess is Trai got caught with a lot of worthless MPC's the last exchange day. Trai and Colson got together somehow, probably through using Trai's shop, and Colson told him he could get current MPC's for Trai's worthless ones. But Colson needed to be paid in greenbacks. Now, not only can't Colson get his hands on that many MPC's, but that amount of MPC's over here for an E-5 would draw attention. Colson's sister runs an elaborate print shop. She makes up plates using MPC's Colson has sent her. Colson passes these off to Trai knowing he'll be leaving Vietnam very soon."

Williams still looked perplexed.

I simplified it. "Let's say Trai lost eleven thousand eight hundred forty dollars after the last exchange. That's worthless money he's holding, never to be recovered. Colson tells Trai he can change those worthless MPC's to current MPC's at, let's say, a dollar fifty on the dollar, paid to Colson in greenbacks, which, if he's connected right, Trai can get. And he obviously is. Trai agrees, for no other reason than it enables him to cut his losses drastically. But Colson gave him bogus MPC's, took Trai's greenbacks, and was fixing to *di di* the country."

"But Trai spotted the bogus money Colson gave him." Williams nodded vigorously as the realization hit him. "The quality must have been off."

"I'd guess. Now Trai's out more money. He gets mad and contacts Mitch. Maybe he thought he could get himself back in good graces with Mitch by turning Colson in and maybe get back on the firebase here. Trai's not supposed to have any MPC's to begin with, so he's out of luck all around. And that's the main reason Mitch didn't use Vinh. Mitch needed to keep the thing from becoming common knowledge around the MP area, the way everyone talks around here." I studied Williams' face, the way

he lowered his eyes, slightly embarrassed.

"And as for quality," I continued, "well, they didn't have to be exactly perfect, at least, not like back in the States where everyone from bank tellers to the Secret Service keeps their eyes open for funny money. Here the MPC's are watersoaked, mudcaked, dirtied play money that's changed frequently anyway. Trai might have been able to pass them on but probably didn't want to take the chance. He'd lost too much already."

Williams and I headed out of the PMO tent where a jeep waited to take me to the convoy marshaling area.

"Too bad Colson didn't tell you where he was getting those snakes. I have Mullens organizing another search for the mate to this last one." A small group of MP's shuffled across the platoon area toward the bunker, dragging shovels behind them.

"Believe me," I said weakly, "I wasn't as interested in where he got it as I was with what he wanted to do with it. But that reminds me, Mullens has a little business going for himself, too." I told him about the marked soap at the Ah Khe.

"Jesus," Williams scowled. "What is it with these guys?

Were they all like this before they joined the army?"

Although I shook my head, meaning I had no inkling about that, I did have a shadow of an idea about the answer. It had something to do with the nature of the war itself, the unpopularity of it, the vagueness of its mission, the senselessness of it. Those qualities (among others) spawned apathy in some, resentment in others, disillusionment in most, all of which created a perfect breeding ground and nesting place for guys like Colson, Mullens, Trai, and the countless other snakes I'd brought down during my years in Nam—those wrapped in and around their own greed, seeking their own twisted, selfish justifications for doing what they did, being where they were.

Not every GI was like that, of course. In my line of duty I saw the worst ones. There were still good men here, good soldiers. But every daily planeload of new arrivals at Cam Rahn Bay brought more doubt from back home, more disillusionment, more resentment—poison to a soldier, like they'd all been snakebit.

I shook Williams' hand. Immediately, as I climbed into the jeep, I was struck with what I wanted to say to Nicole, what I needed to say. I needed to

purge myself of my own slight resentment towards her for what she'd done. I needed to cleanse myself of poison in me, too. Coming from me, I was sure she'd enjoy hearing it. I was sure it would open doors

to friendship.

You were so right, Nicole. Of womanhood and war you were right.

In with the new; out with the old. Breathe deeply.

Breathe freely and live.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

The informer whose information led to the arrest of The Master Spy was Dave Lange.

| DAY | HUSBAND | WIFE | PROFESSION |
|-----------|-------------|-------|------------|
| Monday | Carl Maris | Greta | dentist |
| Tuesday | Earl Katz | Freda | engineer |
| Wednesday | Andy Osman | Jane | carpenter |
| Thursday | Bart Norris | Helen | artist |
| Friday | Dave Lange | Ilene | baker |

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

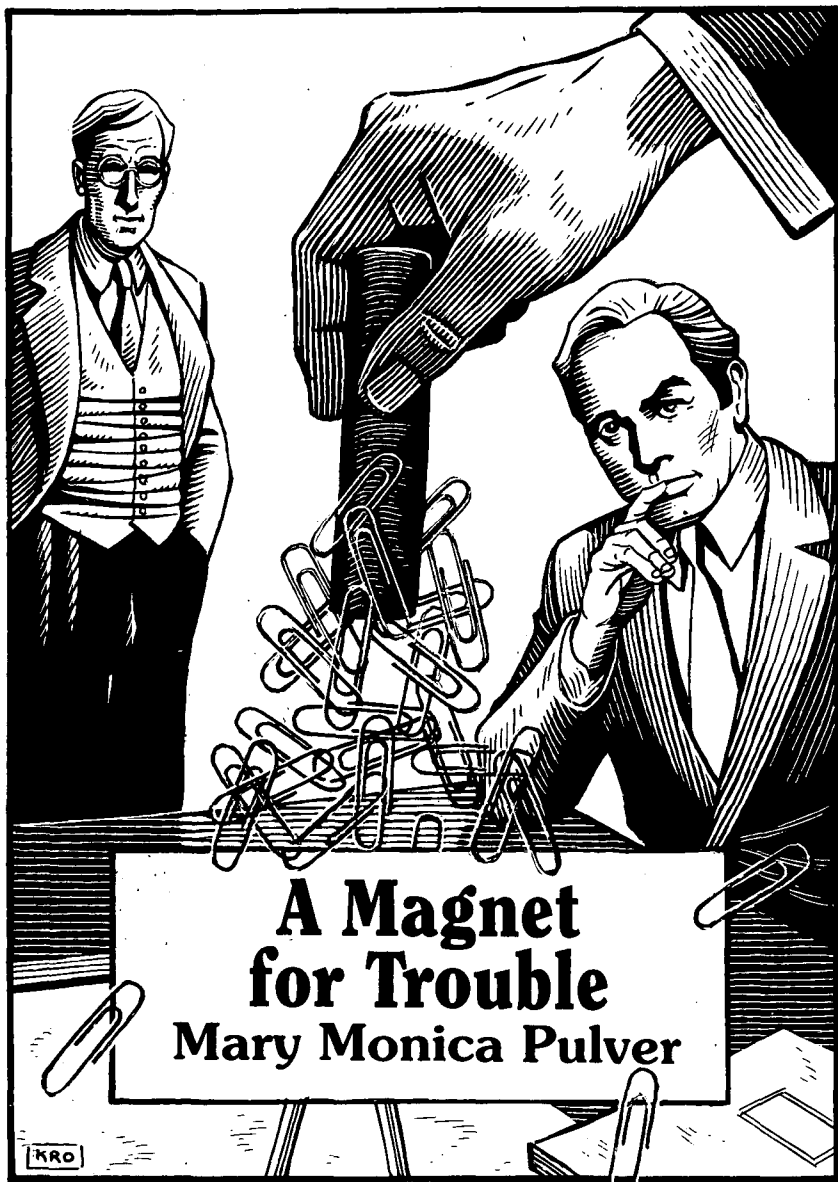
The answer will appear in the September issue.

The Exploration Society of Klutzberg dispatched a six-man expedition into a remote area of southern Asia to study the native culture. On the expedition were the director, a doctor, and experts on farming, crafts, economics, and language. Each lived alone and kept a particular pet, which he took with him wherever he went.

- (1) Of all the pets, the mongoose could kill only the snake (a huge cobra), the cat only the mongoose, the dog only the cat, the tiger only the dog, and the snake the tiger or dog. The canary, kept in a cage, was safe from all the other pets: The mongoose and cat were too quick for the tiger, the cat could successfully elude the snake, and the mongoose could swiftly climb beyond reach of the dog.
- (2) Rob's pet can safely meet with the cat or with the pets of Mr. Katz or the director.
- (3) The doctor's pet must avoid those of Oscar (who is not the economics expert) and Mr. Fulton.
- (4) Tom's pet can visit *only* those of Mr. Johnson and Rob.
- (5) Mr. Howell often visits with Pete; neither has a pet that can safely visit with either the director or Mr. Fulton.
- (6) Pete is not the language expert. Victor is not the doctor.
- (7) Sam, Victor, and Mr. Garrels met one afternoon for further planning. Their meeting posed no problem, as their pets were compatible. Then the three parted, for each had been invited to tea by one of the other expedition members. The hosts were to be the experts on farming, language, and economics.
- (8) Tom invited Mr. Johnson to tea in his palm-thatched shack.
- (9) What began as a pleasant tea in one shack quickly developed into a quarrel that escalated into violence. In the ensuing scuffle, the snake (which did not belong to the language expert) suddenly struck the man attacking its owner. The venom proved fatal in seconds.

Hearing the commotion, Mr. LeMan excused himself from his guest and rushed over—accompanied by his pet, of course. He arrived too late to be of assistance to the victim.

Who was killed? Whose snake bit him?



McIntyre slid his bank card into the slot and held his breath. Ever since an instant cash machine had eaten his card, he hadn't trusted them. Twice since then the card itself had died in some fashion visible only to the machine, so he didn't trust the cards, either. Only his wife's insistence made him get a replacement card each time, and only the damned convenience made him use them.

The machine grumbled softly and asked for his personal identification number, which he punched in slowly and carefully. He didn't want to give it an excuse.

"Hurry up, Mac," snapped his partner. "They're waiting for us."

"They call twenty-four hours after the crime was committed, they can wait two more minutes," groused Detective Sergeant Allen McIntyre, studying the instructions carefully before punching the button to withdraw forty dollars from checking. He was a big man in a cheap suit, with thinning dark hair and small, suspicious brown eyes.

His partner was Jimmy Wheeler, younger, lighter, better dressed, but with the same chronically suspicious air that is the hallmark of the police detective.

They had to walk through the Farmers and Merchants bank lobby anyway, to reach the elevators. It was going to be his turn to buy lunch later, and the cheap restaurants McIntyre preferred when he was buying didn't take checks. So Jimmy could wait a minute or he could go hungry. Unsurprisingly, he waited.

Data One was on the top—twelfth—floor of the bank building. When they stepped off the elevator, they saw a glass door with the Data One name and logo right in front of them. Three casually dressed men were standing in the tiny lobby, halfway through putting on their heavy Minnesota-winter gear.

As McIntyre opened the door, he heard one of them say, "Use net fee is half a gigabite a day." He had some investments whose profits were always being eaten into by various fees; he kept an ear out as he and Jimmy went to the counter to ask the attractive young woman to tell the office manager they were here. Because he had to pay attention to her reply, he only got fragments of the conversation behind him. It involved familiar words like "scuzzy" and "parity," though not in any context he could understand. Perhaps they weren't

talking about investment portfolios or futures after all.

Jimmy and McIntyre sat down to wait for the manager. The men's voices dropped, and they began to chortle. Obviously, dirty jokes were being shared. But when he strained to hear, he got, "At the DOS prompt, type format dot or even format dot dot, and it wipes the fat table," which sent the other two into muffled guffaws. McIntyre wasn't a connoisseur of dirty jokes, but he'd been a man for thirty winters and a cop for twenty. Not until that minute would he have believed there could be one he didn't get.

"China has no TLA's," said one of the men; "that's why it takes them a month to discuss what we can cover in an hour." By the grins, this also was a joke. He began to wonder if he'd had some kind of cerebral accident in the elevator that had severely damaged his language skills.

Before he could compromise his manhood by asking what TLA's were, the door to the inner offices opened and a young man in a nice business suit was standing there. The trio looked abashed at having been caught on the premises by the boss and offered a couple of muffled see ya tomorrows before going out the door.

"My night crew," explained the suit, gesturing at McIntyre and Jimmy to follow him. "I'm Wallace Albion," he said, leading the way to a glassed-in office in the corner of a larger room with six desks in three rows, each with a computer. McIntyre noticed as he passed that the three people at the desks, all women, were making their keyboards rattle like tin cans full of marbles. There was another glass-walled room in the opposite corner, butting up to the receptionist's tiny enclosure. A man was in there.

McIntyre and Jimmy showed their badges and I.D. cards, and McIntyre said, "What's a TLA? And why doesn't China have any?"

"What? Oh, you must've heard my programmers talking. TLA's are three letter acronyms, IRA, ROM, CIA, MRE, like that. China doesn't have an alphabet, so it can't have TLA's."

"Oh. Thanks. Now, what's the problem here?"

"Someone in the Farmers and Merchants bank downstairs has been embezzling funds. He's not very clever, but he did know enough to steal the records when he realized he was suspected. No record, no proof. However, our firm does the bank statements and other audit functions for Farmers

and Merchants. An examination of our records would very likely offer proof of falsifying. But someone got into our vault and destroyed the computer cartridge."

"Maybe," Jimmy said, "we should be talking to the bank, not these people. Since the crook and the crime are both down there."

"I've already told you that you won't find anything helpful down there," objected Albion. "They haven't got anything to show you but some angry people who want to know how come the money they saved all those years has vanished. The computer tape with the bank records of their accounts has been stolen."

"And what have you got to show us up here?" asked McIntyre.

"Well, this." Albion opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a smooth dark cylinder about three inches long and an inch thick. "I'm afraid several of us handled it before we thought about fingerprints."

"What is it?"

"Hey, it's a cow magnet," said Jimmy.

"That's right," confirmed Albion.

"A cow—" McIntyre demanded angrily.

"Sure. You shove it down a cow's throat to pick up barbed

wire and the other metal junk cows are always swallowing," explained Jimmy. "Keeps it from getting into their intestines and causing blockages. The magnet is heavy, it goes to the bottom of their first stomach and stays there."

"Cows eat barbed wire?" asked McIntyre, diverted in spite of himself.

"Not on purpose," explained Jimmy patiently. "You're mending fence, you snip off an end and it falls in the grass, the cow picks it up by accident along with a mouthful of grass. Or a loose bolt gets baled up with the hay, and the cow eats it. Okay?"

"The point is, it's a powerful magnet," said Albion, trying to get control of the conversation again. He bent and slapped it against the front face of his steel desk. "Try it."

McIntyre reached casually to pull it loose and was surprised to find he couldn't. He dug his thick fingers in and heaved, and it came away. The magnet was heavy, as Jimmy had said, and perhaps because he'd just suffered a demonstration of its power, McIntyre was vaguely sure he could feel it making his fingers tingle. He put it back, noting that it leaped from his hand to clang onto the desk's front. "Okay, a strong magnet. And okay, it's weird to bring a

cow magnet into a place where there aren't any cows. So?"

"Magnets erase magnetic tapes."

"So?" repeated McIntyre.

"Computer tapes are like audio tapes are like video tapes: magnetic. Usually, you want to erase a computer tape you degauss it, put it next to an electromagnet, called a degausser. But we don't have one. We don't need one. We just kill the tapes on the enter records and use them again." Seeing a pair of blank looks, he said, "Record on top of the old stuff."

"But you think someone erased a computer tape with this?" said McIntyre.

"I'm all but positive. The tape that might have held the proof of embezzlement has been corrupted." Albion saw a renewal of the look and amended, "Erased, damaged, destroyed. There's a diagnostic test they run on computer tapes, to see if the problem is with the computer or with the tape, and to see if the tape is scratched or kinked or if it's been erased. This tape has been erased."

"You mean it's like a blank tape now," said Jimmy.

Albion hesitated. "No. A computer can read the data on a tape only if it's on there exactly as it should be. If the information is broken or scrambled at one point, the computer blows

up and stops reading at that point. It can't skip over the scratches or scrambles and read the good parts. It's not like us reading a letter that got left out in the rain. You or I could read the parts that aren't washed away, but computers stop at the first unreadable word and can't continue."

"And a magnet somehow puts gaps on the tape?" asked McIntyre doubtfully.

Albion sat behind his desk and descended further into esoterica. "A computer can only read two things, spoken of as off and on. You can combine these offs and ons into patterns—off, on, off, off, on, for example. A magnetic tape magnetically records the offs and ons in sets of nine. Various combinations of these sets form bytes of information. One combination means A, another means B, and so on. A magnet randomly changes the offs and ons, and some of them turn into maybes. Think of it as mixing up the letters, changing A's and B's to R's or G's or Q's or even to nonsense or gibberish. In this case, the enter record got wiped, so we can't even load it up to see how thoroughly it was hit."

McIntyre sighed and got out his notebook.

"What exactly was on the tape?" asked Jimmy, seeking

the core of Albion's explanation.

"The log files. The bank has a master file that holds the name and address of every customer, along with current balances in various accounts, billings, arrears. We keep records of the daily transactions, and we send down a new master file with the updates on it. We record the daily changes on our logging file. The logging file is just a before-and-after image of the master files.

"We keep a month's worth of entries in our logging file, so if the master file is lost or corrupted, we can 'forward recover' the information by going into the logging or journal file." Albion offered a thin smile. "I suspect the embezzler suffered from the Ollie North syndrome. Colonel North destroyed his records, but forgot that nowadays computers make it very easy to keep backup copies."

"But this embezzler found out about it," said Jimmy. "Someone from up here told him."

"Yes."

"And then this embezzler walked into your vault and used this magnet on it."

"No," said Albion. "Our vault isn't open to the public, and it isn't where just anyone can walk in. No one from the bank has been in our vault for over a

year. The damage was done by someone in our shop."

McIntyre smiled just a little bit and sat down. He didn't know logging files from forward recoveries, but payoffs and favors and arm twistings he understood. "Who?" he asked.

"Well, that's the problem. Technically, it could be any of our employees, including me. I'm the manager, and there are a systems programmer, an operations manager, three programmers, plus a lead operator and two operators for each of our three shifts."

"But you don't think it was just any of them," said Jimmy.

"No, because we know about when it was done, and there's only about an eight hour window of opportunity. I think it was one of three people: our day shift lead operator, or one of the two operators. In fact, one of the three women you saw as you came in."

McIntyre looked through the cubicle's glass wall. The three were working furiously at their keyboards. "What about the man I saw in that other office?"

"You mean when you came in? Our programmers work nights, outside the window of oppor—"

"No, the man who was in that other office, right over there." McIntyre gestured toward the

glass enclosure across the room.

"That's not an office, that's where our mainframe computer is," said Albion.

"I don't see a computer in there," said Jimmy.

"They don't have flashing lights and reel-to-reel consoles any more," said Albion. "Our computer looks like a metal credenza. It's kept in an air-conditioned room because it works better when it's kept chilled."

"Still, who's the guy?" asked McIntyre, deciding he didn't need to know right now why computers liked to be chilly.

"The person you saw was Mr. White, our operations manager. Yes, he has access to our vault, but his parents are victims of that embezzler. The last thing in the world he would do is help him out by destroying evidence. In fact, when you're ready to make your arrest, let me know, and I'll find a way to get him out of the office. Otherwise, he's likely to attack her."

"I take it the embezzler has a name," said McIntyre. "You said the bank has a suspect."

"Oh yes. He's Adam Lundquist, an account manager. It's a common enough story; it appears he's a gambler, hits the Indian casinos regularly and loses big, and was in financial trouble until a few months ago. That's probably when the em-

bezzlement started. But he's young and goodlooking, a real charmer. He's single, and he's dating one of our employees—and even more significant, one of those women is his sister. Very fond of him, she is. Denies it could possibly be him."

"So you think it's her," said McIntyre, wondering why, if it was going to be this easy, Albion had led them on this long song and dance.

"Well, you see, the employee Lundquist has been dating is Ms. Feldon, and Mr. White said he saw Lundquist treating Ms. Haas to lunch last Friday. Those are the other two women on the day shift."

"Oh, brother," said Jimmy.

"I don't suppose it's possible that Ms. Feldon or Ms. Haas has been driving a new car or planning an expensive vacation all of a sudden?" asked McIntyre.

"Or been seen buying a cow magnet?" asked Jimmy, bending to pull the thing off the desk. He gave a soft groan of effort that turned to a grunt when it suddenly came away.

"No," said Albion.

"How common are those things?" asked McIntyre. He frowned at his partner, who apparently thought the magnet was some kind of toy. He was dragging paper clips out of the

plastic box on Albion's desk, seeing how big a gob he could get, and spilling some on the floor. "Quit that, Jimmy," he said.

"I wondered about that myself," said Albion. "My systems programmer has a hobby farm, he's the one who identified the thing as a cow magnet. He says any place that sells cattle feed sells these. And you can get them at places like Fleet Farm. They're not hard to find, and they sell for a few dollars."

"Your systems programmer raises cows on this farm?"

"No, horses and miniature goats."

"And they don't walk around with magnets in their stomachs."

"No."

"Where was this one found?" asked McIntyre.

"In the wastepaper basket out in the lobby. Excuse me, but you're going to ruin your watch if you—"

"Hey!" said Jimmy. He'd been discovering the magnet could make the second hand speed up. "Now it's stopped!" He shook his wrist, but that didn't help.

"I'm afraid you're going to need a new watch," said Albion with a mildly satisfied smirk.

"Well, why didn't you warn me?" said Jimmy, tossing the magnet onto the desk as if it

had gotten hot all of a sudden. "What other damage can it do?"

Albion fielded it deftly and stuck it on the side of his desk. "It affects anything that operates on magnetism, including quartz watches and printing calculators," he said, picking up his calculator and turning it on and then off again. "And it damages anything that has magnetic tape on it."

McIntyre shifted in his chair. "How close do you have to get?"

"Close, within a fraction of an inch."

"Oh." He frowned briefly, then rubbed his hands together. "Okay, let's talk to these women. Can we use this office?"

"Of course."

"Good. Send them in one at a time. Let's start with Ms. Haas."

Ms. Haas was so young and sweet, McIntyre could hardly believe she lived on her own, had her own apartment and everything. She'd had lunch with Adam Lundquist twice but, on learning Ms. Feldon was his girl, declined to lunch with him a third time.

Ms. Feldon was a little older and wiser. Already distancing herself from her erstwhile boyfriend, she confessed only to having liked him a lot, noting that when she'd gone with him to Turtle Lake Casino he'd been

like, hypnotized, she might just as well have gone there alone.

When they'd finished with Ms. Lundquist, Adam's older sister, they were no forwarder. She alone was sure he couldn't possibly be an embezzler. "He doesn't always lose when he gambles, you know," she said in explanation of his suddenly catching up on his rent and car payments.

None of the three was very impressed with the magnet, or even knew it was a cow magnet. All were equally disgusted by Jimmy's description of how it was used on the farm.

In his ever-widening search for a relevant question, McIntyre had discovered that all three of the women had accounts at Farmers and Merchants, all for the same reason: "It's so convenient on payday, I just run downstairs on my coffee break and deposit my check." And they all agreed it was great having an ATM right in the building.

"You know, maybe whoever did it didn't do it for love but for money," said McIntyre. "Maybe if we look at the accounts of these women, one of them will have a lot more than it should."

He didn't seem to take this idea very seriously, but it was something to do. It might at

least eliminate a possibility, or so he persuaded Jimmy.

"What, you think we should try for a warrant? We won't get it."

"No, but if we ask them all together if they'll go downstairs with us and ask the ATM to tell them their balances, and two of them agree, the third one won't dare say no—or if she does . . ."

But she—whichever she it was—didn't. Or didn't have a reason to. With Albion, they took the elevator down and found no one else using the ATM.

Ms. Haas went first, pushed her card in, and punched four numbers followed by other buttons as requested while the others waited at a polite distance. McIntyre hardly looked at the slip of paper she thrust at him but signed at Ms. Feldon. She stepped forward, fed her card into the slot, and began punching numbers. In a minute she was back with her slip, which McIntyre again only glanced at.

"Now you, Ms. Lundquist." She stepped fearlessly to the machine, fed her card in, and punched in her secret PIN. The machine beeped and flashed a message, and her card came back out. Annoyed, she fed it in again and punched her PIN more slowly. But again the ATM returned it. She made a

noise like "grrrr" and tried again.

But the machine wasn't having it. She turned and said, "I don't understand it, but the thing won't believe I'm punching in the right numbers. And I am, I really am. If you like, we can go to the counter and ask for a balance."

"I believe you," said McIntyre. "But I think your card has been—" He turned to Albion. "What's the word? Wiped. Because you brought that magnet to work in your purse, didn't you?"

She hesitated just a fraction too long. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about magnets. They erase magnetic tape. And that shiny stripe on the back of your ATM card is magnetic tape. You're under arrest for being an accessory after the fact to embezzlement."

"I kind of figured it was her," said McIntyre a little later. "Someone told Adam he was a suspect. The authorities at the bank certainly wouldn't warn him because he might do exactly what he did. The folks up here only knew there was an embezzler, not who it was. Except Ms. Lundquist. She worked with the logging files. As soon as she realized the Feds were interested in the files for certain accounts, she

knew who they must be after. She told him he was a suspect and how they proposed to prove he did it.

"Of course, it might have been Ms. Feldon or Ms. Haas, too. They work with those accounts, they knew a federal auditor was going to have a look. But Adam had only taken Ms. Haas to lunch twice. She wouldn't risk her job for him, much less prison. And he hadn't been dating Ms. Feldon for very long. People truly in love will sometimes share information they shouldn't, or even do something illegal. But to risk your reputation—and then your freedom—for a charming young man who abandons you for the craps table isn't common.

"Of course, there's the odd exception to any rule, so I couldn't eliminate any of the three as suspects.

"But you want to know what did it? A few weeks ago my son found my ATM card on the floor and stuck it up on the refrigerator with one of those magnets. When Mr. Albion pointed out that magnetic tape was magnetic tape was magnetic tape, and magnets screw up magnetic tape, I all of a sudden understood why the next time I tried to use that card it wouldn't work.

"And I thought that probably whoever snuck that magnet into this place carried it in her purse, where it nestled up cosy to her wallet, in which she carried her ATM card if she had one. Which all three of them did. So if I could get each woman to try her card, and if one card didn't work, I had the one who did it." He sat back in his chair in satisfaction.

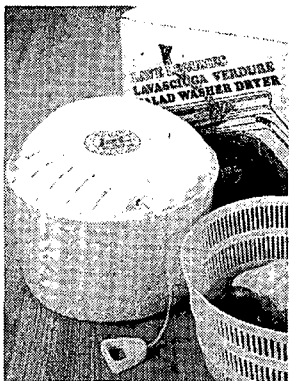
"It helped that Ms. Lundquist isn't an experienced criminal and that she broke down and cried when you arrested her," said Jimmy.

McIntyre grinned. "And spilled her guts about what she

did and what her brother told her he did even though we Mirandized her three different times. It also helps that they have some kind of computer program that can jump over the hits that logging tape took and read what's left on there, which may give them the backup they need to seal the case against Adam Lundquist."

McIntyre blinked and reran what he'd just said in his mind. "Maybe I do understand computers. Come on, Jimmy, we'll finish this report after lunch. The special at Daisy's today is corned beef hash."

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

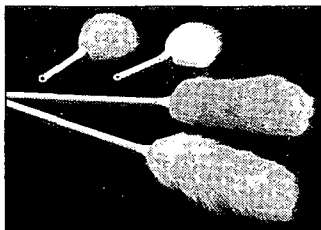


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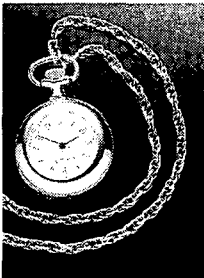
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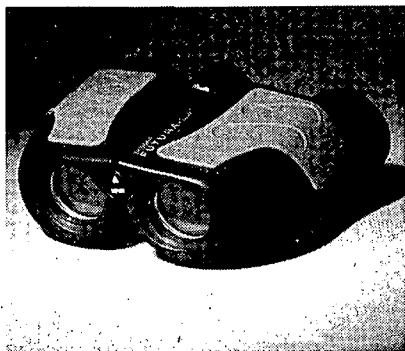
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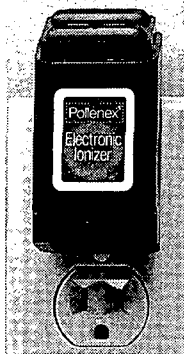
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FICTION

The Man Kali Visited

Janice Law



Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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I am at the inquest and a sallow-faced man with short hair and a blue striped suit is warning me to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth and asking me to state my name and occupation. I am stumbling over my words and forgetting American idioms and remembering irrelevant slang from Bombay because I am feeling hopelessly and irredeemably foreign. Not only is the "truth" in this matter slippery and elusive, but the court does not seem ready for the "whole truth"; and "nothing but the truth" may be impossible.

"My name is Neena Dasgupta and I am office manager and secretary to the publisher of *Skin* magazine." *Skin* magazine runs photographs of pretty women with no clothes on and stories about sexy women by young men of minimal talent and maximal imagination. Its publisher, Mr. A, was my employer and my salvation. Thanks to *Skin* magazine, I went from being the discarded wife of an ambitious graduate student to an independent woman on a good salary.

"Will you tell the court where you were on the afternoon of September 9, 1993?"

"I was at the office of *Skin* magazine until five thirty P.M." Very nice offices, too. I helped with the design. Modern and airy but with interesting colors, cinnabar, ochre, deep pink, and turquoise; colors of the subcontinent; colors for moments of nostalgia and reflection.

"Can you describe that afternoon for the court?"

"It was a most ordinary afternoon. We were laying out pages for the November issue, and I personally was getting Mr. A's schedule organized for the next few weeks."

What this means is planning everything for him, paying the bills, answering his correspondence, dealing with the lawyers, two ex-wives, his elderly mother, and his neurotic Doberman's veterinarian. Although insufficiently appreciated by the puritanical American public, my poor Mr. A was a creative person. He wanted to distill sex into pictures and to distill women into beauty. Perhaps those were wrong desires, yet from my point of view, they seemed quite traditional. Our temple sculptors have been turning naked men and women into images for centuries. But in this new and different climate, it is natural for people to keep their clothing on. And so instead of grottoes and temples full of beautiful sculptures and paintings, we have *Skin* magazine which pays me, as I have mentioned, very well to be keeping Mr. A's schedule straight and seeing that his printers are paid and checking that all models are

old enough or are accompanied with permission forms signed by their mothers.

"'Mr. A' is Mr. James Rembrandt Addison?"

"That is correct."

"And Mr. Addison was in the office that afternoon?"

This is, for anyone who knew Mr. A, a foolish question. Where else would he be? *Skin* magazine was life as he was wanting to live it, where all women are beautiful and sympathetic, all men are attractive and successful, and the dull stretches and sharp edges of life are covered by a mist of desire. This was childish, of course, but we are all as childish as we can manage. What is sad is that we cannot contrive to be children forever, not even in fantasy.

That is what I have learned from this matter, but I do not think the judge wishes to hear my ideas. He is an elderly man with a red face and white hair. I am thinking that he has grown old listening and judging, which must be a so tiring life. I am guessing that he will not want complications in the simple case of a fatal heart attack.

That is definitely how Mr. A died. No "foul play" of the ordinary sort. He was completely alone, I am sure. Of course I would willingly have stayed with him and supported him in the face of immaterial, as of material, threat, but he would not permit that. To let me stay would have been to acknowledge the situation, the implications, the dangers, all of which were complicated, elusive, and unusual.

I decide not to attempt this part of "the truth." Instead, I say, "He went out jogging at one as usual and he had a reservation for lunch at one forty-five at La Caricole. He returned at two forty-five and worked on slides and picture selection until five. Mr. A always had the final say on pictures."

"The office closes at five?"

"Yes, but Mr. A often worked later and I sometimes stayed late, too, if there was a shoot scheduled."

"Why was that?"

"Mr. A, Mr. Addison, was always very proper."

There is laughter in the court and the judge is displeased. You are seeing here an illustration of my point: the "whole truth" is not required because it is not welcome. But Mr. A, who took sexy photos and published soft porn, never told a dirty joke, fondled a model, or made raunchy remarks. He could be very sweet, and all his sexual energy was going into his pictures. Which were always

of a perfect woman in a perfect situation. Which were pictures. Only. If you are understanding my point.

"Please go on, Ms. Dasgupta."

But I must be careful. I am tending to drift off onto the realm of "whole truth," which is dangerous. I must stick to "nothing but the truth," which I like because it tells what I must leave out without committing me to exactly what must be put in. "Some of our younger models have been known to lie about their ages," I say. "Mr. Addison always felt it important in uncertain cases to have an older woman in the studio."

"Yourself."

"Yes. All the other staff are very young and neither Toby nor Mark, the assistant photographers, would have been quite suitable." Most unsuitable, in fact. When I am at a shoot, I wear my large gold earrings and drape a scarf over my head and carry a clipboard and see that they sign everything in sight: permissions, waivers, statement of age, contract, model's agreement, et cetera, et cetera. We have never had any trouble.

"And what time did you leave on the evening of the ninth?"

"I wanted to finish up some correspondence, and I was still working at ten to six when Mr. A asked me to leave."

"He asked you to leave?"

"He said there was no need for me to stay." Of course, I had been intending to stay; the correspondence was just an excuse. I believed that she was coming and I was afraid for him. But that, too, is an unpalatable "whole truth." For Mr. A, too. Or perhaps it was just too late for him. Maybe it was too late from the first day, the first day she arrived at the office.

"And what sort of mood was he in?"

"He was looking forward to shooting a favorite model. I think he said she was scheduled for six thirty."

"Do you know who she was?"

Now here is a difficulty, a case where the "whole truth" and "nothing but the truth" are in conflict. "Nothing but the truth" is obviously safest, and I hear myself say, "I believe it was to be Ms. Kal."

"You believe?"

"That was the name written in his calendar, yes."

"The mysterious Ms. Maria Kal. The Ms. Kal with no known address."

The judge is again displeased. He feels that it is unbusinesslike that we have no address for her. I could explain that manifestations rarely have addresses in the modern sense, although they may have localities. Indeed they may have localities. Ms. Kal's, I think, is around our business. I think she was attracted. And why should that be surprising? For millenniums we have tried to attract spiritual forces: flowers, incense, sacrifices, dances, songs, prayers, rituals spiritual and sexual. We call the forces and sometimes they come. But they do not leave an address; they do not present Social Security cards or sign waivers or fill out W-2 forms. They come, like Ms. Kal, invoked but unbidden, and in surprising form.

It was late, I remember. Six P.M. or maybe six thirty. The July issue had just been sent to the press, and Mr. A had been working, working at the last minute as he always does, checking this, changing that, driving the retouchers mad with his demands for perfection. And I am, of course, reassuring him and calming them and closing doors when tempers are getting high and talking to the printer and being, as Mr. A is always telling me, indispensable. So we are at six fifteen P.M., say, on that June evening, the evening of the solstice, the longest day, the shortest night, a significant day with the warm breezes, the perfect sky. Toby and Mark have gone home; Lydia has made the last coffee of the afternoon; the building's cleaners are running vacuums and polishers in the halls. I am tidying up and getting my purse ready to go when there is a knocking at the locked office door.

I am thinking to ignore it and then it comes again and, such ill luck!, I open the door. There is Ms. Kal as I saw her: a handsome woman of indeterminate age. Older by ten years than our models, though how old I can't say. Perfect skin, wonderful figure, magnificent hair, but mature eyes. Our models tend to be perfect but half formed, all the better to take on the suggestions of the photographer, to be the receptacle of fantasy and desire. In contrast, Ms. Kal was mentally fully formed, her intellect aged and bottled in bond like the premium whisky that advertises in *Skin*. Thirty? Maybe, though forty was not out of the question. Way, way too old and yet impressive! Perfect in her own way, splendid black hair, pale caramel skin, green eyes: a northern princess carrying the blood of warriors and maharajahs or the most wonderful nautch dancer ever imagined.

She would see Mr. A. I am explaining that he is so busy, so tired, that our models are booked so far in advance and only through

certain reputable and famous agencies. And she is smiling, smiling without showing her teeth, which I know will be sharp, and making little impatient gestures like a fine horse, and walking toward Mr. A's office and, before I can stop her, putting her head in and calling him out. I am hoping, hoping, he will send her on her way. But instead, he makes a little sound as if he's just sucked in his breath—and hers with it. "Come in," he says. "Come in. I've been waiting for you." I am feeling very cold because this is not true in the business sense: no appointment, no phone calls, no letters, no contacts. So he can only mean that she is the one he has been waiting to shoot; she is the one who is looking exactly right with no retouching; she is desire and sex and woman all distilled and perfect.

"You have no address for this woman?" the judge asks again.

"Alas, no. I did not wish to interrupt their first conversation, and she was never on the books."

She came, she went. Always late, always at the last second, always on the spur of the moment. A curious and vivid phrase, that, and so right for her. Mr. A would prepare to work late, to shoot her picture into the wee hours, to work till dawn in the dark-room—and then to sulk all day the next day because he had failed. There was always something wrong with the film, with the light, with the always so mysterious inner workings of the camera. Despite an obsessive, heartbreaking persistence, Mr. A never did succeed in getting a usable picture of the absolutely unique Ms. Kal.

"But she did come to the office more than once?"

"I only saw her once. It was my understanding she came several times." This, I am thinking, is safe to say. And quite true.

The judge shakes his head. He is still trying to make sense of a senseless situation. "I have a description given by Mr. Toby Bell, one of the assistant photographers on the magazine. He has testified that he saw Ms. Kal one night when he returned to pick up a camera which he had left on his desk. He describes her, if you remember, Ms. Dasgupta, as slim, blonde, extremely pretty, and about seventeen years old."

"That is not the woman I saw. And Mr. A, as I have explained, would not have been photographing a young woman of 'about seventeen' alone in the studio at night."

"On the other hand, your co-worker, Penny Rohmer, may have seen her leaving the offices. Ms. Rohmer describes a fashionably dressed African-American with very short hair."

"I do not remember any such model."

The judge is not pleased with my memory. As the keeper of the calendar, I should be more accurate, more precise. I should have the full name and address for Ms. Kal and a consistent description of her. I shrug and draw my scarf around my shoulders. I am not venturing into the "whole truth." I have my green card but not my final papers. I am a "resident alien" who must be mature and logical, not a tabloid-crazed citizen who can safely spot Elvis or go joyriding with Martians.

"Now, on the night in question, did you see Ms. Kal—or whoever the model was—arrive?"

"No, I did not." Though I knew she was coming, though I feared the consequences. Mr. A's ambition had become an obsession. He was dropping all his other work, even neglecting his true and only love, the magazine; he was forgetting the joys of fantasy and letting Mark and Toby shoot the November photo spreads. A great mistake, I was reckoning. They lacked Mr. A's so fatal imagination; they lacked his style and flair. But he could think of nothing else but Ms. Kal. Would she return? Could he succeed? Her photos would be the crown of his career, the artistic summit of his ambitions, absolutely unprecedented and, of course, worth a fortune. Meanwhile, I was telling him that she was bad luck, a dangerous woman, a manifestation to be avoided at all costs. Poor Mr. A was alternately laughing at me and drinking bourbon straight out of the bottle in his darkroom.

"All right, Ms. Dasgupta, will you tell the court what happened when you arrived at the office the next morning?"

I feel the tears in my eyes and begin to shake. I was truly very fond of Mr. A, and I am still uncertain whether I am under Ms. Kal's sentence or protection.

"The witness," the judge says, "can have a minute to compose herself." When I am composed, we go on.

"Just take it slowly, please, Ms. Dasgupta. What time did you arrive at *Skin* magazine?"

"About eight forty. It depends on which bus I catch. Sometimes I am as early as eight thirty and sometimes it is almost nine o'clock. I go in and do a little work and then I am opening the office at nine for the others." I could explain a good deal about the office routine, and I would like to do so. I could tell how I open up the shades on the west side and close the blinds on the east. How Lydia starts the coffee machine that wheezes and groans so that Toby

and Mark are making rude remarks. How I turn on my desk radio to the classical station and listen to Monteverdi or Bach, so soothing, so regular. Instead, I must tell about seeing the red light above the darkroom door.

"This was unusual?"

"The red light is only on when someone is working in the darkroom. Mr. A worked at night but rarely until nine in the morning. And Toby and Mark did not have keys." But I was not thinking about Toby and Mark, I was thinking terrible thoughts and remembering terrible memories of the ignorant old village festivals for the goddess with their rivulets of blood and the smoking corpses of headless goats. The goddess of the dawn feeds on blood; the patroness of sex bears our death.

"Please continue," the judge says.

I am surprised to be in the big square courtroom with the so white walls, the green tinged lights, the brown seats. I had been in the office, our pretty airy office with the colors of the subcontinent, ochre, cinnabar, turquoise, and pink, knocking on the door of the darkroom, calling, imploring, begging, then warning that I must be opening the door, the sacred darkroom door never to be opened when its red light is on. I turn the knob, push the door, and blood-colored light washes over darkness. I see the shape on the floor and fumble for the switch and then, in an instant, I am seeing and understanding everything. Poor Mr. A, my benefactor, employer, and friend, is lying on the floor, his tongue out, his face a hideous mask of fear and horror, his bodily fluids mingling with puddles of developer and fix. I put my hand on his chest and touch his wrist and his jugular vein, but Mr. A has already been transformed, swept away on the great wheel of earthly illusion. Perhaps he is even now being reborn in Bombay or Brooklyn, screaming into life with all his old sorrows and pleasures forgotten.

I stand in the darkroom, knowing I must be calling the police and 911 and preparing to tell "the truth," "the whole truth," and "nothing but the truth." But first I am having a look around. There are strips of film, developed film, hanging up against the light, and I can make out images of a nude woman of extraordinary beauty, images which were waiting, I think, only for me and which are fading now with unnatural rapidity, fading and twisting, and going back into the chaos of all things before "truth" and "whole truth" and "nothing but the truth" got separated and distinguished from lies and untruth and indeterminacy.

On the floor lies a single print, the first, perhaps, of the negatives Mr. A had been developing, the print that would have crowned his career and made his fortune. I pick it up carefully because it has lain in the water and chemicals and is creased and stained. I turn it over and even though I am expecting the worst, I am frightened. The voluptuous Ms. Kal had been transformed into the dark goddess with her long red tongue, her necklace of skulls, her girdle of human hands, her black and terrible body, at once the womb and tomb for every thing living now and in the future, through every incarnation.

In the windowless courtroom, I tell the judge "nothing but the truth": how I found Mr. A, how I screamed, how I ran out to call 911.

"Now, Ms. Dasgupta, I know this is difficult for you, but these next questions are very important. Were there any photographs?"

I am so glad he has asked me something I can answer honestly. There was *one* photograph, which now resides wrapped in a piece of fine silk under a garland of flowers in my bedroom. The photo I managed to secrete out of the office under the noses of the so busy crime scene technicians, investigating officers, coroner, and photographer. But there were other *photographs* and I am pleased to say, "Oh yes. There were photographs of Everly Chique for the November issue. They were hanging up to dry and some of her slides were still on the light table."

"Ms. Chique is employed by Hot Stuff Videos, Inc., I believe."

"Ms. Chique has extensive video credits, yes. She is scheduled to appear in our Skin Flicks feature for November."

"According to the office records, these photos were taken on September sixth and seventh. Is that correct?"

"That is correct. Toby was shooting those. He is still learning, but Ms. Chique is very experienced with photo sessions."

"Now I want to be clear about this. There were no other photographs, negatives, roles of film in the darkroom?"

"Oh yes, sir. As I am sure the police have been reporting. Some blank negatives, some torn up papers. Nothing usable, alas, and all the time poor Mr. A lying dead on the floor."

"The police on the scene described him as lying in a pool of liquid with several flat plastic pans around him. How does that fit with your recollection?"

"It is fitting perfectly. He had obviously been working developing something. Perhaps he was discarding the results. Perhaps there

was a flaw in the film. I am thinking a roll of film had not come out."

"Did you remove anything at all from the darkroom, Ms. Dasgupta?"

"No, I did not." Now I am lying. You see how treacherously one slips from a decent approximation of the truth to outright lies? But what should I say? That I removed the photograph that killed Mr. A, a now fading but still dangerous representation of the goddess whom I know as Kali and whom Mr. A knew as Ms. Kal? That would be the "whole truth" but what good would it do us? I am thinking "nothing but the truth" with one exception is what I will be sticking with.

"And did you take anything into the darkroom, Ms. Dasgupta?"

"Some flowers. For the dead." It is appropriate to be ending with truth and a lie. Or with a truth that is not the "whole truth." They understand flowers for the dead. That is very appropriate and how often have I been sending expensive flowers to the funeral service of this person or that for Mr. A. But they might not comprehend flowers for the cruel goddess, who may be lonely in this cold and alien land, who may yet visit me.

Now the judge is rebuking me for tampering with the crime scene, though my actions were understandable and, he believes, innocent. I sense it will be all right. I will keep my green card; I will get my final papers. I must be, I think now, under the protection of the goddess, for he is saying, "Thank you, Ms. Dasgupta. That will be all," and I am stepping down from the witness stand.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE LIPSTICK

Mary Roberts Rinehart

Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

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I walked home after the coroner's inquest. Mother had gone on in the car, looking rather sick, as indeed she had done ever since Elinor's death. Not that she had particularly cared for Elinor. She has a pattern of life which divides people into conformers and nonconformers. The conformers pay their bills the first of the month, go to church—the Episcopal, of course—never by any chance get into anything but the society columns of the newspapers, and regard marriage as the *sine qua non* of every female over twenty.

My cousin Elinor Hammond had openly flouted all this. She had gone gaily through life as if she wakened each morning wondering what would be the most fun that day; stretching her long lovely body between her silk sheets—how Mother resented those sheets!—and calling to poor tired old Fred in his dressing room.

“Let's have some people in for cocktails, Fred.”

“Anything you say, darling.”

It was always like that. Anything Elinor said was all right with Fred. He worshipped her. As I walked home that day I was remembering his face at the inquest. He had looked dazed.

“You know of no reason why your—why Mrs. Hammond should take her own life?”

“None whatever.”

“There was nothing in her state of health to have caused her anxiety?”

“Nothing. She had always seemed to be in perfect health.”

“She was consulting Dr. Barclay.”

“She was tired. She was doing too much,” he said unhappily.

Yet there it was. Elinor had either fallen or jumped from that tenth floor window of Dr. Barclay's waiting room, and the coroner plainly believed she had jumped. The doctor had not seen her at all that day. Only the nurse.

“There was no one else in the reception room,” she testified. “The doctor was busy with a patient. Mrs. Hammond sat down by the window and took off her hat. Then she lit a cigarette and picked up a magazine. After that I went back to my office to copy some records. I didn't see her again until—”

She was a pretty little thing. She looked pale.

“Tell us what happened next,” said the coroner gently.

“I heard the other patient leave about five minutes later. She went out from the consulting room. There's a door there into the hall. We have that arrangement, so—well, so that patients don't

meet. When he buzzed for the next case, I went in to get Mrs. Hammond. She wasn't there. I saw her hat, but her bag was gone. I thought she had gone to the lavatory. Then—"She stopped and gulped. "Then I heard people shouting in the street, and I looked out the window."

The coroner gave her a little time. She got out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

"What would you say was her mental condition that morning, Miss Comings? Was she depressed?"

"I thought she seemed very cheerful," she said.

"The window was open beside her?"

"Yes. I couldn't believe it until I—"

He excused her then. She was openly crying by that time, and it was clear that she had told all she knew.

When Dr. Barclay was called—he had come in late—I was surprised. I had expected an elderly man, but he was only in his late thirties and quite goodlooking. Knowing Elinor, I wondered. She had had a passion for handsome men, except for Fred, who had no looks whatever. Beside me I heard Mother give a ladylike snort.

"So that's it!" she said. "She had as much need for a psychiatrist as I need a third leg."

But the doctor added little to what we already knew. He had not seen Elinor at all that morning. When he rang the buzzer and nobody came, he had gone forward to the reception room. Miss Comings was leaning out the window. All at once she began to scream. Fortunately a Mrs. Thompson arrived at that time and took charge of her. He had gone down to the street, but the ambulance had already arrived.

He was frank enough up to that time. Queried about the reason for Elinor's consulting him he tightened, however.

"I have many patients like Mrs. Hammond," he said. "Women who live on their nerves. Mrs. Hammond had been doing that for years."

"That is all? She mentioned no particular trouble?"

He smiled faintly.

"We all have troubles," he said. "Some we imagine, some we magnify, some are real. But I would say that Mrs. Hammond was an unusually normal person. I had recommended that she go away for a rest. I believe she meant to do so."

His voice was clipped and professional. If Elinor had been attracted to him, it had been apparently a one-sided affair. Fred,

however, was watching him intently.

"You did not gather that she contemplated suicide?"

"No. Not at any time."

That is all they got out of him. He evaded them on anything Elinor had imagined, or magnified. In fact he did as fine a piece of dodging as I had ever seen. His relations with his patients, he said, were particularly confidential. If he knew anything of value he would tell it, but he did not.

Mother nudged me as he finished.

"Probably in love with her," she said. "He's had a shock. That's certain."

He sat down near us, and I watched him. I saw him reach for a cigarette, then abandon the idea, and I saw him more or less come to attention when the next witness was called. It was the Mrs. Thompson who had looked after the nurse, and she was a strangely incongruous figure in that group of Elinor's family and friends. She was a large motherly looking woman, perspiring freely and fanning herself with a small folding fan.

She stated at once that she was not a patient.

"I clean his apartment for him once a week," she said. "He has a Jap, but he's no cleaner. That day I needed a little money in advance, so I went to see him."

She had not entered the office at once. She had looked in and seen Elinor, so she had waited in the hall, where there was a breeze. She had seen the last patient, a woman, leave by the consulting room door and go down in the elevator. A minute or so later she heard the nurse scream.

"She was leaning out the window yelling her head off," she said. "Then the doctor ran in and we got her on a couch. She said somebody had fallen out, but she didn't say who it was."

Asked how long she had been in the hall, she thought about a quarter of an hour. She was certain no other patient had entered during that time. She would have seen them if they had.

"You are certain of that?"

"Well, I was waiting my chance to see the doctor. I was watching pretty close. And I was never more than a few feet from the door."

"You found something belonging to Mrs. Hammond, didn't you? In the office?"

"Yes, sir. I found her bag."

The bag, it seemed, had been behind the radiator in front of the window.

"I thought myself it was a queer place for it, if she was going to—do what she did." And she added, naively, "I gave it to the police when they came."

So that was that. Elinor, having put her hat on the table, had dropped her bag behind the radiator before she jumped. Somehow it didn't make sense to me, and later on of course it made no sense at all.

The verdict was of suicide while of unsound mind. The window had been examined, but there was the radiator in front of it, and the general opinion seemed to be that a fall would have to be ruled out. Nobody of course mentioned murder. In the face of Mrs. Thompson's testimony it looked impossible. Fred listened to the verdict with blank eyes. His sister Margaret, sitting beside him and dressed in heavy mourning, picked up her bag and rose. And Dr. Barclay stared straight ahead of him as though he did not hear it. Then he got up and went out, and while I put Mother in the car I saw him driving away, still with that queer fixed look on his face.

I was in a fine state of fury as I walked home. I had always liked Elinor, even when, as Mother rather inelegantly said, she had snatched Fred from under my nose. As a matter of cold fact, Fred Hammond never saw me after he first met her. He had worshipped her from the start, and his white stunned face at the inquest only added to the mystery.

The fools, I thought. As though Elinor would ever have jumped out that window. Even if she was in trouble she would never have done it that way. There were so many less horrible ways. Sleeping tablets, or Fred's automatic, or even her smart new car and carbon monoxide gas. But I refused to believe that she had done it at all. She had never cared what people thought. I remembered almost the last time I had seen her. Somebody had given a suppressed desire party, and Elinor had gone with a huge red letter A on the front of her white satin dress.

Mother nearly had a fit when she saw it.

"I trust, Elinor," she said, "that your scarlet letter does not mean what it appears to mean."

Elinor had laughed.

"What do you think, Aunt Emma?" she said. "Would you swear that never in your life—"

"That will do, Elinor," Mother said. "Only I am glad my dear sister is not alive to see you."

She had been very gay that night, and she had enjoyed the little run-in with Mother. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I had liked her. She could cope with Mother. She could, of course. She wasn't an only daughter, living at home and on an allowance which was threatened every now and then. And she had brought laughter and gaiety into my own small world. Even her flirtations—and she was too lovely not to have had plenty of them—had been light-hearted affairs, although Mother had never believed it.

She was having tea when I got home. She sat stiffly behind the teatray and inspected me.

"I can't see why you worry about all this, Louise. You look dreadful," she said. "What's done is done. After all, she led Fred a miserable life."

"She made him happy, and now she's dead," I said shortly. "Also I don't believe she threw herself out that window."

"Then she fell."

"I don't believe that either," I said.

"Nonsense! What do you believe?"

But I had had enough. I left her there and went upstairs to my room. It wasn't necessary for Mother to tell me that I looked like something any decent dog would have buried. I could see that for myself. I sat down at my toilet table and rubbed some cream into my face, but my mind was running in circles. Somebody had killed Elinor and had gotten away with it. Yet who could have hated her enough for that? A jealous wife? It was possible. She had a way of taking a woman's husband and playing around with him until she tired of him. But she had not been doing that lately. She had been, for her, rather quiet.

Plenty of people, of course, had not liked her. She had a way of riding roughshod over them, ignoring their most sensitive feelings or laughing at them. She never snubbed anyone. She said what she had to say, and sometimes it wasn't pleasant. Even to Fred. But he had never resented it. He was like that.

I could see the Hammond place from my window, and the thought of Fred sitting there alone was more than I could bear. Not that I had ever been in love with him, in spite of Mother's hopes. I dressed and went down to dinner, but I was still out of favor. I couldn't eat, either. Luckily it was Mother's bridge night, and after she and her three cronies were settled at the table I managed to slip out through the kitchen. Annie, the cook, was making sandwiches and cutting cake.

"It beats all, the way those old ladies can eat," she said resignedly.

I told her if I was asked for to say I had gone to bed, and went out. Fred's house was only two blocks away, set in its own grounds like ours, and as I entered the driveway, I saw a man standing there, looking at it. I must have surprised him, for he turned suddenly and looked at me. It was Dr. Barclay.

He didn't recognize me, however. I suppose he had not even seen me at the inquest. He touched his hat and went out to the street, and a moment later I heard his car start off. But if he had been in the house, Fred did not mention it. I rang and he himself opened the door. He seemed relieved when he saw me.

"I thought you were the damned police again," he said. "Come in. I've sent the servants to bed. They're all pretty well shot."

We went into the library. It looked as if it hadn't been dusted for a month. Elinor's house had always looked that way; full of people and cigarette smoke and used highball glasses. But at least it had looked alive. Now—well, now it didn't. So it was a surprise to see her bag lying on the table. Fred saw me looking at it.

"Police returned it today," he said. "Want a drink?"

"I'll have some White Rock. May I look inside it, Fred?"

"Go to it," he said dully. "There's nothing there that doesn't belong. No note, if that's what you mean."

I opened the bag. It was crammed as usual: compact, rouge, coin purse, a zipper compartment with some bills in it, a small memorandum book, a handkerchief smeared with lipstick, a tiny perfume vial, and some samples of dress material with a card pinned to them, "Match slippers to these." Fred was watching me over his glass, his eyes red and sunken.

"I told you. Nothing."

I searched the bag again, but I could not find the one thing which should have been there. I closed the bag and put it back on the table. But he wasn't paying any attention to me anyhow. He was staring at a photograph of Elinor in a silver frame, on the desk.

"All this police stuff," he said. "Why can't they just let her rest? She's asleep now, and she never got enough sleep. She was beautiful, wasn't she, Lou?"

"She was indeed," I said honestly.

"People said things. Margaret thought she was foolish and extravagant." He glanced at the desk in the corner, piled high with what looked like unopened bills. "Maybe she was, but what the hell did I care?"

He seemed to expect some comment, watching me out of haggard eyes. So I said:

"You didn't have to buy her, Fred. You had her. She was devoted to you."

He gave me a faint smile, like a frightened small boy who had been reassured.

"She was, you know, Lou," he said. "I wasn't only her husband. I was her father, too. She told me everything. Why she had to go to that damned doctor—"

"Didn't you know she was going, Fred?"

"Not until I found a bill from him," he said grimly. "I told her I could prescribe a rest for her, instead of her sitting for hours with that young puppy. But she only laughed."

He talked on, as if he was glad of an audience. He had made her happy. She went her own way sometimes, but she always came back to him. He considered the coroner's verdict an outrage. "She fell. She was always reckless about heights." And he had made no plans, except that Margaret was coming to stay until he closed the place. And as if the mere mention of her name had summoned her, at that minute Margaret walked in.

I had never liked Margaret Hammond. She was a tall, angular woman, older than Fred, and she merely nodded to me.

"I decided to come tonight," she said. "I don't like your being alone. And tomorrow I want to inventory the house. I'd like to have father's portrait, Fred."

He winced at that. There had been a long quarrel about old Joe Hammond's portrait ever since Fred's marriage. Not that Elinor had cared about it, but because Margaret had always wanted it, she had held onto it. I looked at Margaret. Perhaps she was the nearest to a real enemy Elinor had ever had. She had hated the marriage, had resented Elinor's easy-going, extravagant life. Even now she could not help looking at the desk, piled high with bills.

"I'd better straighten that for you," she said. "We'll have to find out how you stand."

"I know how I stand."

He got up and they confronted each other, Fred with his back to the desk, as if even then he was protecting Elinor from Margaret's prying eyes.

She shrugged and let it go. Yet as I left the house I was fairly confident she would spend the night at that desk. Fred asleep, the exhausted sleep of fatigue and escape, and Margaret creeping

down to the desk, perhaps finding that bill of Dr. Barclay's and showing it to him in the morning.

"So that's how she put in her time! And you pay for it!"

It was warm that night. I walked slowly home, hoping the bridge game was not over. But it seemed my night for unexpected encounters, for I had gone nearly half the way when I realized I was being followed. That is, someone was walking softly behind me. I felt the hair rising on my scalp as I stopped and turned. But it was only a girl. When I stopped, she stopped, too. Then she came on, and spoke my name.

"You're Miss Baring, aren't you?"

"Yes. You scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry. I saw you coming out of the inquest today, and a reporter told me your name. You've been to the Hammonds', haven't you?"

"Yes. What about it?"

She seemed uncertain. She stood still, fiddling with her handbag. She was quite young, and definitely uneasy.

"Were you a friend of Mrs. Hammond's?" she inquired.

"She was my cousin. Why?"

She seemed to make a decision, although she took her time to do it. She opened her bag, got out a cigarette, and lit it before she answered.

"Because I think she was pushed out that window," she said defiantly. "I'm in an office across the street, and I was looking out. I didn't know who she was, of course."

"Do you mean that you saw it happen?" I said incredulously.

"No. But I saw her at the window, just before it happened, and she was using a lipstick. When I looked out again, she was—she was on the pavement." She shivered and threw away the cigarette. "I don't think a woman would use a lipstick just before she was going to do a thing like that, do you?"

"No," I said. "How long was it between that and when you saw her, down below?"

"Hardly a minute."

"You're sure it was Mrs. Hammond?"

"Yes. She had on a green dress, and I had noticed her hair. She didn't have a hat on. I—well, I went back tonight to see if the lipstick was somewhere on the pavement. I couldn't find it. The street was crowded. Anyhow, someone may have picked it up. It's three days ago. But I'm pretty sure she still had it when she fell."

That was what I had not told Fred, that Elinor's gold lipstick was missing from her bag.

I looked at my watch. It was only eleven o'clock, and Mother was good for another hour.

"We might go and look again," I said. "Do you mind?"

She didn't mind. She was a quiet-spoken girl, certain that Elinor had not killed herself. But she didn't want her name used. In fact, she would not tell me her name.

"Just call me Smith," she said. "I don't want any part of this. I've got a job to hold."

I never saw her again, and unless she reads this, she will probably never know that she took the first step that solved the case. Because I found the lipstick that night. It was in the gutter, and a dozen cars must have run over it. It was crushed flat, but after I had wiped the mud off, Elinor's monogram was perfectly readable.

Miss Smith saw it and gasped.

"So I was right," she said.

The next minute she had hailed a bus and got on it, and as I say I have never seen her since.

I slept badly that night. I heard the party below breaking up and the cars driving away. When Mother came upstairs she opened my door, but I turned off the light and closed my eyes, which was the only escape I knew of. I knew then that I had a murder to consider, and it seemed unimportant whether she had won two dollars or lost it that evening. But I got up after she had settled down for the night and hid that battered lipstick in the lining of my hatbox.

It was late when I got to Dr. Barclay's office the next morning. The reception room door was unlocked and I walked in. The room was empty, so I went to the window and looked down. I tried to think that I was going to jump, and whether I would use a lipstick or not if I were. It only made me dizzy and weak in the knees, however, and when the nurse came in I felt like holding on to her.

If she recognized me she gave no sign of it.

"I don't think you have an appointment, have you?" she inquired.

"No. I'm sorry. Should I?"

She looked as though I had committed *lèse majesté*, no less; and when I gave my name, she seemed even more suspicious. She agreed, however, to tell Dr. Barclay I was there, and after a short wait she took me back to the consulting room.

The doctor got up when he saw me, and I merely put Elinor's lipstick on the desk in front of him and sat down.

"I don't think I understand," he said, staring at it.

"Mrs. Hammond was at the window in your reception room, using that lipstick, only a minute before she fell."

"I see." He looked at it again. "I suppose you mean it fell with her."

"I mean that she never killed herself, doctor. Do you think a woman would rouge her mouth just before she meant to do—what we're supposed to think she did?"

He smiled wryly.

"My dear girl," he said, "if you saw as much of human nature as I do, that wouldn't surprise you."

"So Elinor Hammond jumped out your window with a lipstick in her hand, and you watch the Hammond house last night and then make a bolt for it when I appear. If that makes sense—"

It shocked him. He hadn't recognized me before. He leaned back in his chair and looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

"I see," he said. "So it was you in the driveway."

"It was indeed."

He seemed to come to a decision then. He leaned forward in his chair.

"I suppose I'd better tell you, and trust you to keep it to yourself. I hadn't liked the way Mr. Hammond looked at the inquest. That sort of thing is my business. I was afraid he might—well, put a bullet through his head."

"You couldn't stop it, standing in the driveway," I said skeptically.

He laughed a little at that. It made him look less professional, more like a human being. Then he sobered.

"I see," he said. "Well, Miss Baring, whatever happened to Mrs. Hammond, I assure you I didn't do it. As for being outside the house, I've told you the truth. I was wondering how to get in when you came. His sister had called me up. She was worried."

"I wouldn't rely too much on what Margaret Hammond says. She hated Elinor like poison."

I got up on that and retrieved the lipstick. He got up, too, and surveyed me unsmilingly.

"You're a very young and attractive woman, Miss Baring. Why don't you let this drop? After all, you can't bring her back. You know that."

"I know she never killed herself," I said stubbornly, and went out.

I was less surprised than I might have been to find Margaret in the reception room when I reached it. She was standing close to the open window from which Elinor had fallen, and for one awful minute I thought she was going to jump herself.

"Margaret!" I said sharply.

She jerked and turned. She never used makeup, and her face was a dead white. But I was surprised to find her looking absolutely terrified when she saw me. She pulled herself together, however.

"Oh, it's you, Louise," she said. "You frightened me." She sat down abruptly and wiped her face with her handkerchief. "She must have slipped, Lou. It would be easy. Try it yourself."

But I shook my head. I had no intention of leaning out that window. Not with Margaret behind me. She said she had come to pay Fred's bill for Elinor, and I let it go at that. Nevertheless, there was something queer about her that day, and I felt shivery as I went down in the elevator. Women at her time of life sometimes go off balance to the point of insanity.

I had some trouble in starting my car, which is how I happened to see her when she came out of the building. And then she did something that made me stop and watch her. There was no question about it. She was looking over the pavement and in the gutter. So she knew Elinor's lipstick had fallen with her. Either that or she had missed it out of the bag.

She didn't see me. She hailed a taxi and got into it, her tall figure in its deep mourning conspicuous in that summer crowd of thin light dresses. To this day I don't know why I followed her, except that she was the only suspect I had. Not that I really believed then that she had killed Elinor. All I knew was that someone had done it.

I did follow her, however. The taxi went on and on. I began to feel rather silly as it passed through the business section and into the residential part of town. Here the traffic was lighter, and I had to fall back. But on a thinly settled street the taxi stopped and Margaret got out. She did not see me or my car. She was looking at a frame house, set back from the street, and with a narrow porch in front of it, and as I watched her she climbed the steps and rang the bell.

She was there, inside the house, for almost an hour. I began to feel more idiotic than ever. There were so many possible reasons for her being there; reasons which had nothing to do with Elinor. But when she finally came out, I sat up in amazement.

The woman seeing her off on the porch was the Mrs. Thompson of the inquest.

I stooped to fix my shoe as the taxi passed me, but I don't believe Margaret even saw the car. Nor did Mrs. Thompson. She didn't go into the house at once. Instead she sat down on the porch and fanned herself with her apron, and she was still there when I went up the steps.

She looked surprised rather than apprehensive. I don't suppose she had seen me at the inquest. She didn't move.

"I hope you're not selling anything," she said, not unpleasantly. "If you are you needn't waste your time."

It was impossible to connect her with crime. Any crime. By the time a woman has reached fifty, what she is is written indelibly on her. Not only on her face. On her hands, on the clothes she wears and the way she wears them. She was the sort who got up in the morning and cooked breakfast for a large family. Probably did her own washing, too. Her knuckles were large and the skin on them red, as if they were too much in hot water. But her eyes were shrewd as she surveyed me.

"I'm not selling anything," I said. "May I sit down and talk to you?"

"What about?" She was suspicious now. "I've got lunch to get. The children will be coming home from school."

She got up, and I saw I would have to be quick.

"It's about a murder," I said shortly. "There's such a thing as being accessory after the fact, and I think you know something you didn't tell at the Hammond inquest."

Her florid color faded somewhat.

"It wasn't a murder," she said. "The verdict—"

"I know all about that. Nevertheless I think it was a murder. What was Mrs. Hammond's sister-in-law doing here if it wasn't?"

She looked startled, but she recovered quickly.

"I never saw her before," she said. "She came to thank me for my testimony. Because it showed the poor thing did it herself."

"And to pay you for it, I suppose?"

She flushed angrily.

"Nobody paid me anything," she said. "And now I think you'd better go. If you think anybody can bribe me to lie you're wrong. That's all."

She went in and slammed the door, and I drove back to town, puzzled over the whole business. Was she telling the truth? Or had there been something she had not told at the inquest? Certainly I believed that the doctor had known more than he had told. But why conceal anything? I began to feel as though there was a sort of conspiracy around me, and it was rather frightening.

I was late for lunch that day, and Mother was indignant.

"I can't imagine why, with nothing to do, you are always late for meals," she said.

"I've had plenty to do, Mother," I told her. "I've been working on Elinor's murder."

She gave a small ladylike squeal.

"Murder?" she said. "Of course she wasn't murdered. Who would do such a thing?"

"Well, Margaret for one. She always loathed her."

"Women in Margaret's position in life do not commit crimes," she said pontifically. "Really I don't know what has happened to you, Louise. The idea of suspecting your friends—"

"She is no friend of mine. And Elinor was."

"So you'll stir up all sorts of scandal. Murder indeed! I warn you, Louise, if you keep on with this idiotic idea you will find yourself spread all over the newspapers. And I shall definitely stop your allowance."

With this dire threat she departed, and I spent the afternoon wondering what Dr. Barclay and the Thompson woman either knew or suspected, and in getting a shampoo and wave at Elinor's hairdresser's.

The girls there were more than willing to talk about her, and the one who set my hair told me something I hadn't known.

"Here I was, waiting for her," she said. "And she was always so prompt. Of course she never came, and—"

"You mean you expected her here, the day it happened?"

"That's right," she agreed. "She had an appointment for four o'clock. When I got the paper on my way home, I simply couldn't believe it. She'd always been so gay. Of course the last few weeks she hadn't been quite the same, but naturally I never dreamed—"

"How long since you noticed a change in her?" I asked.

"Well, let me see. About Easter, I think. I remember I liked a new hat she had, and she gave it to me then and there! Walked out in her bare head. I ran after her with it, but she wouldn't take it back. She said a funny thing, now I think of it. She said sometimes new hats were dangerous!"

I may have looked better when I left the shop, but what I call my mind was doing pinwheels. Why were new hats dangerous? And why had Elinor changed since Easter?

Fred had dinner with us that evening. At least he sat at the table and pushed his food around with a fork. Margaret hadn't come. He said she was in bed with a headache, and he spent most of the time talking about Elinor.

It was ghastly, of course. Even Mother looked unhappy.

"I wish you'd eat something, Fred," she said. "Try to forget the whole thing. It doesn't do any good to go over and over it. You made her very happy. Always remember that."

Sometime during the meal I asked him if anything had happened to upset Elinor in the spring. He stared at me.

"In the spring? When?"

"About Easter," I said. "I thought she'd been different after that. As if she wasn't well, or something."

"Easter?" he said. "I don't remember anything, Lou. Except that she started going to that damned psychiatrist about then."

"Why did she go to him, Fred?" Mother inquired. "If she had any inhibitions I never noticed them."

If there was a barb in this, he didn't notice it. He gave up all pretense of eating and lit a cigarette.

"You saw him," he said. "He is a goodlooking devil. Maybe she liked to look at him. It would be a change from looking at me."

He went home soon after that. I thought, in spite of his previous protests, that he had resented the doctor's good looks and Elinor's visits to him. And I wondered if he was trying to build up a defense against her in his own mind; to remember her as less than perfect in order to ease his tragic sense of loss.

I slept badly. I kept seeing Fred's face, and so I was late for breakfast the next morning. Yes, we still go down to breakfast. Mother believes in the smiling morning face over the coffee cups, and the only reason I had once contemplated marrying Fred was to have a tray in bed. But at least she had finished the paper, and I took it.

Tucked away on a back page, only a paragraph or two, was an item reporting that Mrs. Thompson had been shot the night before! I couldn't believe it.

I read and reread it. She was not dead, but her condition was critical. All the police had been able to learn from the family was that she had been sitting alone on the front porch when it happened. Nobody had even heard the shot, or if they did they had thought it was the usual backfire. She had been found by her husband lying on the porch floor when he came home from a lodge meeting. That had been at eleven o'clock. She was unconscious when he found her, and the hospital reported her as being still too low to make a statement. She had been shot through the chest.

So she had known something, poor thing. Something that made her dangerous. And again I remembered Margaret, going up the steps of the little house on Charles Street. Margaret searching for Elinor's lipstick in the street, Margaret who had hated Elinor, and who was now in safe possession of Fred, of old Joe Hammond's portrait, of Elinor's silk sheets, and—I suddenly remembered—of Fred's automatic, which had lain in his desk drawer for years on end.

I think it was the automatic which finally decided me. That and Mrs. Thompson, hurt and perhaps dying. She had looked so—well, so motherly, sitting on that little porch of hers, with children's dresses drying on a line in the side yard, and her hands swollen with hard work. She had needed some money in advance, she had gone to the doctor's office to get it, and something had happened there that she either knew all the time or had remembered later.

Anyhow, I went to our local precinct station house that afternoon and asked a man behind a high desk to tell me who was in charge. He was eating an apple, and he kept on eating it.

"What's it about?" he said, eyeing me indifferently.

"It's a private matter."

"He's busy."

"All right," I said. "If he's too busy to look into a murder, then I'll go downtown to Headquarters."

He looked only mildly interested.

"Who's been murdered?"

"I'll tell *him* that."

There was an officer passing, and he called him.

"Young lady here's got a murder on her mind," he said. "Might see if the captain's busy."

The captain was not busy, but he wasn't interested either. When I told him it was about Elinor Hammond, he said he understood the case was closed, and anyhow it hadn't happened in his district. As Mrs. Thompson was not in his district either, and as he plainly thought I was either out of my mind or looking for publicity, I finally gave up. The man behind the desk grinned at me when I passed him on the way out.

"Want us to call for the corpse?" he inquired.

"I wouldn't ask you to call for a dead dog," I told him bitterly.

But there was a result, after all. I drove around the rest of the afternoon, trying to decide what to do. When I got home I found Mother in the hall, looking completely outraged.

"There's a policeman here to see you," she hissed. "What on earth have you done?"

"Where is he?"

"In the living room."

"I want to see him alone, Mother," I said. "I haven't done anything. It's about Elinor."

"I think you're crazy," she said furiously. "It's all over. She got into trouble and killed herself. She was always headed for trouble. The first thing you know, you'll be arrested yourself."

I couldn't keep her out. She followed me into the room, and before I could speak to the detective there, she told him I had been acting strangely for the past few days, and that she was going to call a doctor and put me to bed. He smiled at that. He was a capable looking man, and he more or less brushed her off.

"Suppose we let her talk for herself," he said. "She looks quite able to. Now, Miss Baring, what's all this about a murder?"

So I told him, with Mother breaking in every now and then to protest; about Elinor and the lipstick, about her appointment at her hairdresser's shortly after the time she was lying dead on the pavement, and my own conviction that Mrs. Thompson knew something she hadn't told.

"I gather you think Mrs. Hammond didn't kill herself. Is that it?"

"Does it look like it?" I demanded.

"Then who did it?"

"I think it was her sister-in-law."

Mother almost had a fit at that. She got up, saying she had heard enough nonsense and that I was hysterical. But the detective did not move.

"Let her alone," he said gruffly. "What about this sister-in-law?"

"I found her in Dr. Barclay's office yesterday," I said. "She insisted that Elinor had fallen out the window. She said the floor was slippery, and she wanted me to try it myself." I lit a cigarette, and found to my surprise that my hands were shaking. "Maybe it sounds silly, but she knew about the lipstick. She tried to find it in the street."

But it was my next statement which really made him sit up.

"I think she was in the office the day Elinor was killed," I said. "I think the Thompson woman knew it. And I think she went out there last night and shot her."

"Shot her?" he said sharply. "Is that the woman out on Charles Street? In the hospital now?"

"Yes."

He eyed me steadily.

"Why do you think Miss Hammond shot her?" he said. "After all, that's a pretty broad statement."

"Because she went there yesterday morning to talk to her. She was there an hour. I know. I followed her."

Mother started again. She couldn't imagine my behavior. I had been carefully reared. She had done her best by me. And as for Margaret, she had been in bed last night with a headache. It would be easy to verify that. The servants—

He waited patiently, and then got up. His face was expressionless.

"I have a little advice for you, Miss Baring," he said. "Leave this to us. If you're right and there's been a murder and a try at another one, that's our job. If you're wrong, no harm's been done. Not yet, anyhow."

It was Mother who went to bed that afternoon, while I waited at the telephone. And when he finally called me, the news left me exactly where I had been before. Mrs. Thompson had recovered consciousness and made a statement. She did not know who shot her, or why, but she insisted that Margaret had visited her merely to thank her for her testimony, which had shown definitely that Elinor had either fallen or jumped out of the window. She had neither been given nor offered any money.

There was more to it, however. It appeared that Mrs. Thompson had been worried since the inquest and had called Margaret on the telephone to ask her if it was important. As a matter of fact, someone *had* entered the doctor's office while she was in the hall.

"But it was natural enough," he said. "It was the one individual

nobody ever really notices. The postman."

"The postman?" I said weakly.

"Exactly. I've talked to him. He saw Mrs. Hammond in the office that morning. He remembers her all right. She had her hat off, and she was reading a magazine."

"Did he see Mrs. Thompson?"

"He didn't notice her, but she saw him all right."

"So he went out last night and shot her!"

He laughed.

"He took his family to the movies last night. And remember this, Miss Baring. That shot may have been an accident. Plenty of people are carrying guns now who never did before."

It was all very cheerio. Elinor had committed suicide, and Mrs. Thompson had been shot by some one who was practicing for Hitler. Only I just didn't believe it. I believed it even less after I had a visit from Dr. Barclay that night.

I had eaten dinner alone. Mother was still in bed refusing to see me, and I felt like an orphan. I was listening to the war news on the radio and wondering if I could learn enough about nursing to get away somewhere when the parlormaid showed him in. He was apparently not sure of his welcome, for he looked uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry to butt in like this," he said. "I won't take much of your time."

"Then it's not a professional call?"

He looked surprised.

"Certainly not. Why?"

"Because my mother thinks I'm losing my mind," I said rather wildly. "Elinor Hammond is dead, so let her lie. Mrs. Thompson is shot, but why worry? Remember the papers! Remember the family name! No scandal, please. No—"

"See here," he said. "You're in pretty bad shape, aren't you? How about going to bed? I'll talk to you later."

"So I'm to go to bed!" I said nastily. "That would be nice and easy, wouldn't it? Somebody is getting away with murder. Maybe two murders. And everybody tries to hush me up. Even the police!"

That jolted him.

"You've been to the police?"

"Why not? Why shouldn't the police be told? Just because you don't want it known that someone was pushed out of your office window—"

He was angry. He hadn't sat down, and I made no move to do so. We must have looked like a pair of chickens with our feathers spread ready to fight. But he tried to control himself.

"See here," he said. "You're dealing with things you don't understand. Good God, why can't you stay out of this case?"

"There wasn't any case until I made one," I said furiously. "I don't understand. Why is everybody warning me off?" I suppose I lost control then. The very way he was watching me set me off. "How do I know you didn't do it yourself? You could have. Either you or the postman. And he was at the movies!"

"The postman!" he said staring. "What do you mean, the postman?"

I suppose it was his astonished face which made me laugh. I laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop. Then I was crying, too. I couldn't stop that either. I could hear myself practically screaming, and suddenly and without warning he slapped me in the face.

It jerked my head back, and he had to catch me. But it stopped me all right. I pulled loose from him and told him to get out of the house. He didn't move, however. It didn't help to see that he had stopped looking angry; that in fact he seemed rather pleased with himself.

"That's the girl," he said. "You'd have had the neighbors in in another minute. You'd better go up to bed, and I'll send you some sleeping stuff from the drugstore."

"I wouldn't take anything you sent me on a bet," I said bitterly.

He ignored that. He redeemed my cigarette from where it was busily burning a hole in the carpet—good heavens! Mother!—and dropped it in an ashtray. Then to my fury he leaned down and patted me on the shoulder.

"Believe it or not," he said. "I didn't come here to attack you. I came to ask you not to go out alone at night, until I tell you you may." He picked up his hat. "I mean what I'm saying," he added. "Don't go out of this house alone at night, Miss Baring. Any night."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, still raging. "Why shouldn't I go out at night?"

He was liking me less and less by the minute. I could see that.

"Because it may be dangerous," he said shortly. "And I particularly want you to keep away from the Hammond house. I mean that, and I hope you'll have sense enough to do it."

He banged the front door when he went out, and I spent the next half hour trying to smooth the burned spot in the carpet and hating

him like poison. I was still angry when the telephone rang in the hall. It was Margaret!

"I suppose we have you to thank for the police coming here to-night," she said. "Why in heaven's name can't you leave us alone? We're in trouble enough, without your making things worse."

"All right," I said recklessly. "Now I'll ask you one. Why did you visit Mrs. Thompson yesterday morning? And who shot her last night?"

She did not reply. She gave a sort of gasp. Then she hung up the receiver.

It was a half hour later when the druggist's boy brought the sleeping tablets. I took them back to the kitchen and dropped them in the coal range while Annie watched me with amazement. She was fixing Mother's hot milk, I remember, and she told me that Clara, the Hammonds' cook, had been over that night.

"She says things are queer over there," she reported. "Somebody started the furnace last night, and the house was so hot this morning you couldn't live in it."

I didn't pay much attention. I was still pretty much shaken. Then I saw Annie look up, and Fred was standing on the kitchen porch, smiling his tired, apologetic smile.

"May I come in?" he said. "I was taking a walk, and I saw the light."

He looked better, I thought. He said Margaret was in bed and the house was lonely. Then he asked if Annie would make him a cup of coffee.

"I don't sleep much anyhow," he said. "It's hard to get adjusted. And the house is hot. I've been getting rid of a lot of stuff. Burning it."

So that explained the furnace. I hoped Annie heard it.

I walked out with him when he left and watched him as he started home. Then I turned up the driveway again. I was near the house when it happened. I remember the shrubbery rustling, and stopping to see what was doing it. But I never heard the shot. Something hit me on the head. I fell, and after that there was a complete blackout until I heard Mother's voice. I was in my own bed, with a bandage around my head and an ache in it that made me dizzy.

"I warned her," Mother was saying, in a strangled tone. "The very idea of going out when you told her not to!"

"I did my best," said a masculine voice. "But you have a very stubborn daughter, Mrs. Baring."

It was Dr. Barclay. He was standing beside the bed when I opened my eyes. I suppose I was still confused, for I remember saying feebly:

"You slapped me."

"And a lot of good it did," he retorted briskly. "Now look where you are! And you're lucky to be there."

I could see him better by that time. He looked very queer. One of his eyes was almost shut, and his collar was a wilted mess around his neck. I stared at him.

"What happened?" I asked dizzily. "You've been in a fight."

"More or less."

"And what's this thing on my head?"

"That," he said, "is what you get for disobeying orders."

I began to remember then, the scuffling in the bushes, and something knocking me down. He reached over calmly and took my pulse.

"You've got a very pretty bullet graze on the side of your head," he said calmly. "Also I've had to shave off quite a bit of your hair." I suppose I wailed at that, for he shifted from my pulse to my hand. "Don't worry about that," he said. "It was very pretty hair, but it will grow again. At least thank God you're here!"

"Who did it? Who shot at me?"

"The postman, of course," he said, and to my rage and fury went out of the room.

I slept after that. I suppose he had given me something. Anyhow it was the next morning before I heard the rest of the story. Mother had fallen for him completely, and she wouldn't let him see me until my best silk blanket cover was on the bed and I was surrounded by baby pillows. Even then in a hand mirror I looked dreadful, with my head bandaged and my skin a sort of yellowish gray. He didn't seem to mind, however. He came in, big and smiling, with his right eye purple and completely closed by that time, and told me I looked like the wrath of heaven.

"You're not looking your best yourself," I said.

"Oh, that!" he observed, touching his eye gingerly. "Your mother put a silver knife smeared with butter on it last night. Quite a person, mother. We get along fine."

He said I was to excuse his appearance because he hadn't been home. He had been busy all night with the police. He thought he

would go there now and clean up. And with that my patience gave way completely.

"You're not moving out of this room until I know what's been going on," I stormed. "I'm running a fever right now, out of pure excitement."

He put a big hand on my forehead.

"No fever," he said. "Just your detective mind running in circles. All right. Where do I start?"

"With the postman."

So then he told me. Along in the spring Elinor had come to him with a queer story. She said she was being followed. It made her nervous. In fact, she was pretty well frightened. It seemed that the man who was watching her wherever she went wore a postman's uniform. She would be having lunch at a restaurant—perhaps with what she called a man friend—and he would be outside a window. He would turn up in all sorts of places. Of course it sounded fantastic, but she swore it was true.

Some faint ray of intelligence came to me.

"Do you mean it was this man the Thompson woman remembered she had seen going into your office?"

"She's already identified him. The real letter carrier had been there earlier. He had seen Mrs. Hammond sitting in a chair, reading a magazine. But he had gone before the Thompson woman arrived. The one she saw was the one who—well, the one who killed Elinor."

I think I knew before he told me. I know I felt sick.

"It was Fred, wasn't it?"

"It was Fred Hammond. Yes." He reached over and took my hand. "Tough luck, my dear," he said. "I was worried about it. I tried to get her to go away, but you knew her. She wouldn't do it. And then not long ago she wore a dress at a party with the scarlet letter A on it, and I suppose that finished him."

"It's crazy," I gasped. "He adored her."

"He had an obsession about her. He loved her, yes. But he was afraid he might lose her. And he was wildly jealous of her." He looked slightly embarrassed. "I think now he was particularly jealous of me."

"But if he really loved her—"

"The line between love and hate is pretty fine. And it's just possible too that he felt she was never really his until—well, until no one else could have her."

"So he killed her!"

"He killed her," he said slowly. "He knew that nobody notices the postman, so he walked into my office and—"

He got up and went to the window. I sat up dizzily in bed.

"But he was insane," I said. "You can't send him to the chair."

"Nobody will send him to the chair," he said somberly. "Just remember this, my dear. He's better off where he is. Perhaps he has found his wife by this time. I think he hoped that." He hesitated. "I was too late last night. I caught him just in time when he fired at you, but he put up a real battle. He got loose somehow and shot himself."

He went on quietly. There was no question of Fred's guilt, he said. Mrs. Thompson in the hospital had identified his photograph as that of the postman she had seen going into the office, and coming out shortly before she heard the nurse screaming. The bullet with which she had been shot had come from Fred's gun. And Margaret—poor Margaret—had been suspicious of his sanity for a long time.

"She came to see me yesterday after she learned the Thompson woman had been shot. She wanted him committed to an institution, but she got hysterical when I mentioned the police. I suppose there wasn't much of a case, anyhow. With Mrs. Thompson apparently dying and the uniform gone—"

"Gone? Gone how?"

"He'd burned it in the furnace. We found some charred buttons and things last night."

I lay still, trying to think.

"Why did he try to kill Mrs. Thompson?" I asked. "What did she know?"

"She had not only remembered seeing a postman going in and out of my office just before Miss Comings screamed. She even described him. And Margaret went home and searched the house. She found the uniform in a trunk in the attic. She knew then."

"She collapsed. She couldn't face Fred. She locked herself in her room, trying to think of what to do. But she had told Fred she was going to see Mrs. Thompson that day, and she thinks perhaps he knew she had found the uniform. Something might have been disturbed. She doesn't know, nor do I. All we do know is that he left his house that night, got out his car, and tried to kill the only witness against him. Except you, of course."

"Except me!"

"Except you," he repeated dryly. "I tried to warn you, you may remember! I came here and you threw me out."

"But why me? He had always liked me. Why would he try to kill me?"

"Because you wouldn't leave things alone," he said. "Because you were a danger from the minute you insisted Elinor had been murdered. And because you telephoned Margaret last night and asked her why she had visited Mrs. Thompson, and who had shot her."

"You think he was listening in?"

"I know he was listening in. He wasn't afraid of his sister. She would have died to protect him, and he knew it. But here you were, a child with a stick of dynamite, and you come out with a thing like that! That was when Margaret sent me to warn you."

I suppose I flushed.

"I'm sorry," I said guiltily. "I've been a fool all along, of course." His one remaining eye twinkled.

"I wouldn't go as far as that," he said. "That stubbornness of yours really broke the case. Not," he added, "that I like stubborn women. Gentle and mild is my motto."

I had no difficulty in getting him back to the night before. He seemed to want to forget it. But he finally admitted that he had been watching the Hammond house all evening, and that when Fred came to our kitchen door he had been just outside. Fred, however, had seemed quiet. He drank his coffee and lit a cigarette. And then of course I had walked out to the street with him.

"Good God," he said. "If I ever wanted to waylay anyone and beat her up—!"

However, it had looked all right at first. Fred had started down the street toward home, and he followed him behind the hedge. But just too late he lost him, and he knew he was on his way back. Fred had his revolver lifted to shoot me when he grabbed him.

Suddenly I found I was crying. It was all horrible. Elinor at the window, and Fred behind her. Mrs. Thompson, resting after a hard day's work, and Fred shooting her. And I myself—

He got out a grimy handkerchief and dried my eyes.

"Stop it," he said. "It's all over now, and you're a very plucky young woman, Louise Baring. Don't spoil the record."

He got up rather abruptly.

"I think you've had enough of murder and sudden death," he said lightly. "What you need is quiet. I'm giving up your case, you

know. There will be someone in soon to dress that head of yours."

"Why can't you do it?"

"I'm not that sort of doctor."

I looked up at him. He was haggard and tight with strain. He was dirty, he needed a shave, and that awful eye of his was getting blacker by the minute. But he was big and strong and sane. A woman would be safe with him, I thought. Any woman. Although of course she could never tell him her dreams.

"I don't see why you can't look after me," I said. "If I'm to look bald I'd prefer you to see it. After all you did it."

He grinned. Then to my surprise he leaned down and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"I've wanted to do that ever since you slammed that lipstick down in front of me," he said. "And now for God's sake will you stop being a detective and concentrate on growing some hair on the side of your head? Because I'm going to be right around for a considerable time."

When I looked up Mother was in the doorway, beaming.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



In **Hardware**, Linda Barnes brings back Carlotta Carlyle, a six foot tall redhead who plays killer volleyball (Delacorte Press, \$19.95). Carlotta's got a Boston P.I. license, but she occasionally drives a cab on the graveyard shift for the G&W Cab Company. There are rumors of beatings of cabbies, and Carlotta discovers hidden microphones at the garage. Sam, co-owner of G&W and the honest scion of a mob lord, asks her to ignore them. Carlotta reluctantly agrees. Sam is hiding something, not a good sign between old friends and erstwhile lovers. Events now move quickly: a drive-by shooting, highjackings, burglary, and then a fatal firebomb that almost robs Carlotta of two people very near and dear. Aided by her new computer and her tenant Roz's natural hacking talent, Carlotta finds that the trail leads back decades. Barnes writes with a fresh eye, great energy, and a lot of wit; her plotting is deft and canny.

Mary Higgins Clark fans will love her latest, **Let Me Call You Sweetheart** (Simon & Schuster, \$24), with suspense entwined around an old murder, legal politics, and a budding romance. Kerry McGrath had just joined the prosecutor's office when a beautiful young woman was murdered, her body strewn with sweetheart roses. The husband's trial was marked by a strong prosecution and a very weak defense, and he was sent to prison. Years later, Kerry is looking forward to a judgeship when her daughter Robin is injured in a car accident. Robin needs minor plastic surgery, and Kerry takes her to the best. As she waits for Robin, Kerry sees a face from the past—twice. The famous surgeon has given at least two of his patients the beautiful face of the "Sweetheart Murder" victim. Encouraged by the imprisoned husband's new attorney,

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Kerry must decide whether to reopen the case. She'll be risking her political appointment and much more. Don't start this book unless you have time to finish it at one sitting.

In a refreshing change of pace, author Jon Katz has created a series with a suburban father whose part-time detective business leaves him with the lion's share of the child care as his wife pursues her career. Kit Deleeuw returns in another strong entry in **The Last Housewife** (Doubleday, \$19.95) that puts him in the center of a heated community debate. When the outspoken feminist principal of the town's middle school is murdered, the police arrest Shelly Bloomfield, a stay-at-home mother of three who fought with the dead educator over her son's suspension. As Kit interviews Shelly, her neighbors, her family, and the victim's colleagues, it is clear that Shelly may become a martyr to an ideological debate over a child's welfare: every working mother (including Kit's wife) worries that she may be short-changing her family. To catch the killer, Kit engages the help of a group of women who dub themselves "The Harpies." The tale is both tragic and ironic, and Katz writes about the modern working mother's dilemma with great sympathy and compassion.

If you haven't discovered Callahan and her mom Edna, pick up Kathy Hogan Trocheck's latest, **Happy Never After** (HarperCollins, \$20), and immerse yourself in Callahan's cockeyed Southern-grits world. Callahan is a former cop and peripatetic P.I. who runs a maid service called House Mouse with Edna and a very mixed bag of female "mice." Business is booming, but how can she resist going to work for the VelvetTeens? The local trio was Callahan's all-time favorite girl-group of the sixties, and two-thirds of the group have been promised a comeback, cashing in on the nostalgia craze, if they can find their missing backup singer. That's before their former manager, another local who's become a music mogul, claims that he owns all rights to the VelvetTeens, from their name to their hit tunes. The plot quickly thickens, and Callahan must do more than look for a long-gone singer: she has to catch a killer. This is great fun, lively and different, and Trocheck is able to push her characters very far out without crossing the line of credibility. Enjoy!

Carol O'Connell follows up her Edgar-caliber first novel with another winner, **The Man Who Cast Two Shadows** (Putnam, \$22.95). Mallory is a beautiful young cop whose childhood was spent on the streets before she was rescued by a remarkable homicide detective and his gracious wife. They're both dead now, and

Mallory has been filling the days of her temporary suspension from the NYPD in partnership with Charles Butler, her father's old friend, a brilliant, reclusive character as eccentric as Mallory. Their newest case involves investigating allegations that a young boy has paranormal abilities, but a woman murdered blocks from her home grabs Mallory's attention. The victim was wearing her blazer, and was initially identified as Mallory. She takes it personally, and when that happens, there's no stopping her. Strong writing and exceptional characters marked O'Connell's debut, and this sequel matches that effort. A genuine talent is at work here, and I only regret that it will probably be months before Mallory's third outing.

G. M. Ford introduces Leo Waterman, Seattle private eye and recovering alcoholic, in a solid debut novel with the memorable title of **Who in Hell Is Wanda Fuca** (Walker, \$21.95). His dad was a local politico, so Leo knows everyone and serves as a knowledgeable guide to a city that has drastically changed in the last few decades. When an aging mobster asks to become his latest client, Leo is naturally disinclined to refuse. And how difficult can it be, after all, to track the movements of the man's teenage granddaughter and her wannabe ecological terrorist friends? A twist on the private eye convention is Leo's use of street people as his operatives, and their part in the investigation enlivens the case considerably.

Caroline G. Hart offers fans another inventive and lively Annie Laurence Darling tale in **Mint Julep Murder** (Bantam, \$19.95). As owner of the Death on Demand bookstore, Annie and her handsome husband Max would normally be attending the annual Dixie Book Festival with little more on their minds than deciding which publishers' parties to attend. This year, however, Annie has been coerced to serve as liaison to five famous authors who have been chosen to receive awards. Her patience is already sorely stretched by the egoism of her charges; she didn't need the added aggravation of her three best customers (including her mother-in-law), all determined to peddle their zany book proposals at the festival. Certainly she didn't need a publisher named Hazlitt who's promising to bring out a revealing roman à clef starring none other than Annie's five authors. And all that takes place even before the man is murdered at his own cocktail soiree. Hart paints her Southern literary scene with a keen satirical brush and an impish display of colorful broad comedy.

Pete Hautman debuted ex-cop Joe Crow in *Drawing Dead*, ap-

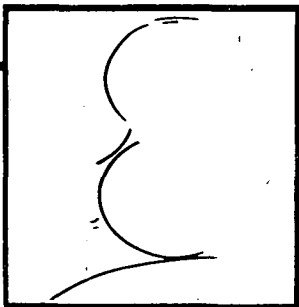
propriately earning him comparisons to Donald Westlake and Elmore Leonard. Now Crow is back in another wildly black comic tale, **Short Money** (Simon & Schuster, \$21), and it's a dilly. We pick up Crow's story in the days before *Drawing Dead* when Crow is facing a thirty-third birthday and finding little to celebrate. All too soon, though, those lackluster days become a fond memory as Crow is tossed into the middle of a muddle that teeters between the hilarious and the brutal. Characters like Crow's estranged father and punk-rock promoter Laura Debrowski orbit the engaging hero, while the rest of the cast spins out of this world. The result is a truly wild ride.

John Dunning reprises Denver book dealer Cliff Janeway in his second outing, **The Bookman's Wake** (Scribner, \$21), a must-read for bibliophiles everywhere. Janeway is hired by the head of a local detective agency to fly to Seattle and play bounty hunter. A young woman named Eleanor Rigby has jumped bail, and the agency will pay Janeway a very big fee to pick her up for trial. More than the money, however, is the appeal of the book angle: Rigby has allegedly stolen a small-press edition of Poe's *The Raven* that authorities claim doesn't even exist. It is fortunate that Janeway is a former Denver cop as well as a bookseller because the fight over this special edition becomes deadly. As Jonathan Gash does with antiques, Dunning throws away more insider's tips on rare books and collecting them than most of his readers have ever known.

Dick Lochte takes us to the Big Easy in private eye Terry Manion's second case, **The Neon Smile** (Simon & Schuster, \$21). Manion is hired by a TV talk show producer to reopen a thirty-year-old murder case as a result of a fan letter written by a local boy. The assignment intrigues Manion from the start because two men, both close to him and both now dead, apparently had ties to the case: Manion's banker father, and his much-revered mentor, homicide cop J. J. Legendre. Lochte then flashes back three decades to Legendre and his involvement with Tyrone Pano, a black militant leader accused of murdering his ex-girlfriend. But Legendre's main focus then was to catch a brutal serial killer, a killer whom Manion's current investigation has awakened from a long sleep. Lochte peoples his New Orleans with quirky characters and a plot as jazzy and hot as the city's Cajun food.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



The last time Kathy Bates tackled a story by Stephen King—*Misery*—the result was an Academy Award winning performance. In **Dolores Claiborne**, another thriller from King, Bates's performance is once again Oscar caliber.

In this dramatic tale, adapted for the screen by Tony Gilroy, Bates stars as the title character, a long-suffering stoic Maine woman who is accused of murdering the wealthy old dowager she'd kept house for for more than twenty years. Things look pretty bleak for Dolores when, as the film opens, the local postman finds her about to smash her employer's already bloodied head with a rolling pin.

Twenty years ago Dolores had been accused of murdering her husband, and although she

got off, the suspicion that she did it never died.

New York City is light years away from the isolated, almost incestuous world of Maine's Little Tall Island, where Dolores lives. In New York Dolores's estranged daughter, the wonderfully named Selena St. George (Jennifer Jason Leigh), leads the glamorous life of a whisky-swilling, pill-popping, chainsmoking magazine writer, but when she receives an anonymous fax of a newspaper article about the murder with a note asking, "Isn't this your mother?," she reluctantly heads home to a place she hasn't seen in some time.

One man who's pursuing the current case is Detective John Mackey (Christopher Plummer), whose apparent obsession stems from the fact that he lost the first case involving Do-

lores. Mackey, on the verge of retirement, proudly points out to Selena that he's handled eighty-six cases in his career—and eighty-five have been completed to his satisfaction. Now he wants to make up for it, no matter what the truth may be.

We find out what really happened to Selena's father through a series of cleverly introduced flashbacks. These flashbacks roll spookily and seamlessly onto the screen, keeping the story moving back and forth over a twenty year period.

Director Taylor Hackford does a fine job of creating the claustrophobic atmosphere of Dolores's difficult life. The ever-changing skies, the chilling cold—it's even cold when it's warm, remarks Selena—the ramshackle house where Dolores lives, all help to create the tough-talking, wise-cracking woman who may or may not have killed two people.

Kathy Bates is simply marvelous in the title role. Her dry, deadpan delivery is right on the mark. And her Down East Maine accent puts her in a class with Meryl Streep.

Dolores may look weathereaten, but she is not a beaten woman. Over the years she's taken on anything that came her way, from an abusive

husband to a dictatorial employer to a cop who just won't give up. A new murder charge hardly gives her pause.

It's the strength of her character and the wonderful acting of the rest of the cast that make this an outstanding movie. Jennifer Jason Leigh is a bundle of nerves after being taken straight from the writing assignment of a lifetime to a world that is a lifetime ago for her. Beneath her worldly, tough New York exterior is a vulnerable girl left far behind in the past. When daughter and mother are reunited, the air crackles with tension. But their relationship evolves as more and more is revealed about Dolores and her motives.

Judy Parfitt plays Vera Donovan, the woman who employed Dolores all those years. But she is really playing two roles, both very well. At first she is an aristocratic boss, a dragon-queen for whom nothing can be done well enough by the help. Later, after an apparent stroke, she is a helpless invalid who must rely on Dolores for everything.

David Strathairn plays Joe St. George, Dolores's hard-drinking loser of a husband, and he comes across as fairly reprehensible. It should be noted that he gets what he deserves.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious won by Kathleen Grover Honorable mentions go California; Julie G. De-York; John D. Poniske of Dean Scovill of Eugene, son of Springfield, Missouri; Richard N. Brush of Dowling, Michigan; James R. Lewis of Coconut Creek, Florida; Mark Alessio of Jackson Heights, New York; Donny Copenhagen of Rittman, Ohio; and Virginia Sterling of Alma, Michigan.



Photograph contest was of Kent, Washington. to Don Peyer of Carson, Groat of Theresa, New Brookhaven, New York; Oregon; Jackie Collin-

Ernst Haas, © 1967 Magnum Photos

THE FRIENDS OF EDDY POET by Kathleen Grover

Eddy held another grape under the beak of Ginnie's raven Rosebud. Much as he and the bird loathed one another, Ginnie adored Rosebud, and he could not bring himself to wring its neck. Lodged in Rosebud's crop like a blue carbuncle were three of the countess's pearls, as pale and perfect as Berenice's teeth. The Fat Man had lifted them from the countess, and with a little help from a lovely lady of uncertain name, Eddy had relieved the Fat Man of them. Eddy was getting them back the natural way. Hence the grapes.

"Nevermore," remarked Rosebud, fluttering out an open window.

"Come back here, you untrained cormorant!" Eddy shrieked.

The bird flew off. Swearing with frustration, Eddy hot-wired the Dusenberg convertible the inspector's son had carelessly parked in the street. Off he sped, and narrowly missed sideswiping an ungainly blue pickup driven by a tanned man with spit-pale eyes. Swerving to avoid an elderly maiden lady and a mustached Belgian, he clipped the fender of a Volkswagen driven by an angry woman with a choppy haircut.

Rosebud landed on a wall near the river. Eddy squealed to a stop and leaped out of the car, narrowly missing a tall, handsome Englishman and his artist wife admiring the sunset.

"Feathered devil!" Eddy screamed, lunging at the bird. He missed and fell in the river.

"Rosebud," he whispered piteously as he sank beneath the waves.

"Guano," the bird replied smugly, depositing a perfect pearl on the wall beneath him.

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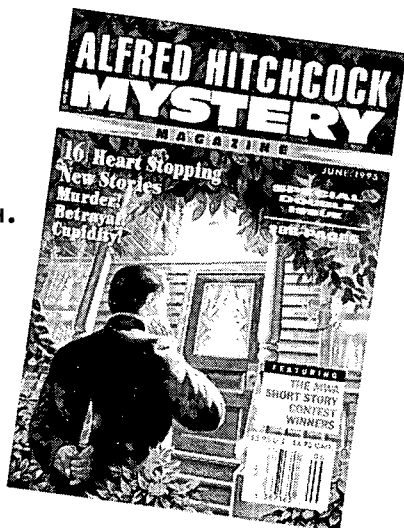
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